behind him, threw the money on the mat, and gave a resounding slap on wife's left shoulder. "There you are," said he. "There are three hundred rupees in that bag. Don't say anymore that I am a useless man." His wife, Chitra, was at first frightened that her husband might have stolen the money. When, however, he told her the tale, they both laughed. The strong wind outside suddenly opened the door and the lightning flashed in—Chitra fell flat on the coins. Sunil rose up and bolted the door, a thing they both had forgotten to do in their flush of excitement.

Banroo returned unexpectedly early. He was furious when he heard the story of Sunil and the loss of three hundred rupees. He burst out laughing, which is what ghosts do when they are about to teach human beings a lesson. The whole place shook with the sound of the laughter. Some said it is the hyena, but others thought they knew better and said to themselves it is a ghost out on some mischief. His war-cry over, Banroo asked to be shown the man's house, which Tapai did with the utmost willingness. Of course, the house he pointed out was that of the rich brahmin and not the hovel where Sunil lived. Banroo walked in through the wall and materialised behind a huge jackfruit tree. There he stood hiding himself, but letting anyone who came out on the verandah, see his horns. Once more he laughed. The sound of the laughter and the sight of the horns were enough to frighten anyone. At least, so Banroo thought.

He did not bargain for the presence of a brave young son of the house lately returned from the town, who took the laughter to be that of a hyena and not that of a ghost and came out with a staff to drive it away, lest it frighten the cows and calves in the cowshed. Rakhal, for that was the brave lad's name, saw the horns of the ghost. Anyone else would have connected the laughter and the horns and convinced himself that here was a ghost who had materialised to do some harm. Not so Rakhal.

They had a huge cow with horns curved like the new moon, who stood as high as a man from the tip of the horn to the tip of its hoof. The cow had been missing that day. A search party sent to find her out had not yet returned. The name of the cow was Banree, but its daknam (pet name) was Banroo, exactly the same as that of the ghost.

As soon as he saw the horns, Rakhal called out: "You, rascal, Banroo. I have caught you this time. I shall teach you a nice lesson." So saying he lifted the stick and advanced towards the jackfruit tree. Banroo, the ghost at once made himself invisible and flew with a howl. People thought it must be a ghost. Rakhal was sure it was a jackal whose ears he perhaps mistook for horns in the dark shade under the tree. At the same time the search party came back with Banroo, the cow, and every one forgot the laughter, the horns and the howl, in the joy of having got back the lost cow.

Banroo went back to the plain by the side of the river Padma. "This is no safe place any more for us poor ghosts," said he and gathering all his followers they went up towards the foot hills of the Himalayas where men were scarce and the tropical forests the right place for ghosts to roam at their sweet will and pleasure.

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THREE BAGS OF GOLD

A Notorious Pair of Sandals

THREE BAGS OF GOLD

AND OTHER INDIAN FOLK TALES

MURKOT KUNHAPPA

ASIA PUBLISHING HOUSE

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PREFACE

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER—that could also have been the title of this book. They are stories which I heard from my parents and grandparents, teachers and elders. They interested me so much that even in later life I continued collecting them from my friends, colleagues and companions in various parts of India.

India has a stock of stories which will never be exhausted. The stories included here are from the length and breadth of the country. You have here tales from Punjab and Assam, Kashmir and Kerala, with those from Bengal, Bombay, Madras, Rajputana, etc. thrown in to add variety and spice. Each one of the sixteen States of India could produce a volume of stories on its own, so that we could easily have sixteen volumes of Indian folk tales, if not more!

Nor would that exhaust the reservoir of Indian stories. The tales of animals and birds of the kind that formed the basic material for AEsop's Fables; stories of Vikramaditya, Vararuchi and others which prove by their nature that several of the Arabian Night Tales had their origin in India, are all there for us to choose from. The great epic Mahabharata with over a lakh of verses, gives us endless stories ranging from very short episodes, a few lines in length, to very long stories, each one of which could form a small book by itself. Add to them the stories from the Ramayana and the multitude of religious tales in the eighteen Puranas and one can easily estimate the voluminous literature that India has in this line. Even that would not exhaust the store, for one would have to add the parables in the Upanishads which teach the highest philosophy through the medium of stories. The tales of Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and

others form still another group. One could go on and on like this listing up the various collections of Indian stories; but enough has been said here to make the reader ask for more and more of Indian stories, in volume after volume.

It would, of course, not be correct to dub them all as folk tales and present a hotch-potch in the same book. Here, therefore, in these tales, I have included only those stories handed down from father to son by word of mouth and which do not form part of well-known classical, literary or religious literature.

The main idea kept in view in selecting the stories has been to include only those that would grip the reader from beginning to end. There should be not a dull page—was the aim.

MURKOT KUNHAPPA

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ADVENTURES OF BHIMA, PRINCE OF BENARES

In days of yore and times long gone by, there lived in Benares, a strong, brave and noble prince called Bhīma. In feats of strength, wrestling and fencing there was none in all the land to beat him, so that the people said: Truly, he is the great Pandava prince reborn on earth. At the wrestling ground where he practised daily, there were many very strong youths, each one a host in himself. Among them all, however, three young men, the son of a carpenter, the son of a goldsmith and the son of a blacksmith happened to be the strongest and the bravest. Naturally, therefore, Bhima and those three young men became very fast friends. They hunted together, wrestled together, played together and were invariably found together.

One evening they were sitting around rubbing their exercised limbs with medicated oil, when there appeared from nowhere a giant carrying a huge thick iron wall on his head. Before the youths knew what was happening, he had erected the wall around them in the twinkling of an eye. He then shouted in a thundering voice: "Are you the strongest men in the land? Well then let me see you break this wall." The goldsmith's son got up and pushed it with all his might; but he could not break the wall. The carpenter's son tried his best; but he too could not break the wall. The blacksmith's son thereupon rushed so hard at it that it shook like canvas, but break it, he could not. At last Bhima tried. He rushed like a mighty boar and putting his right shoulder to it, used his whole body weight and pushed down the eastern side of the wall. The other three sides then fell of their own. The giant clapped his hands, laughed aloud and said: "Ah! ah, I am glad to see that you are, in truth, the

strongest man in all the kingdom. Here is a tip that will bring you good fortune. Go forth east for fourteen days, brave the dangers on the way and you will come to the kingdom of the Lohars. The King of the country has a daughter as beautiful as the moon on the fourteenth day. He has promised the hand of this gem of a girl, to only that youth who can enter her room, fighting or deluding the strong guards. The castle is strong and the girl's boudoir is on the seventh floor. Go there and try your luck, and I for one wish you the best of luck."

The strong brave prince then and there decided to go and win the princess. The father proudly gave his consent to his courageous son. The mother put up a brave show but offered to send a hundred soldiers to guard him on the way and help him in the venture. "No mother," said he, "I want to win the bride as Bhima and not as the son of a king." "Then," said the Queen, "take your friends, please do not go alone, my son." "That I will," replied the prince, "if they come as friends and equals and not as obedient subjects of a king, otherwise I go alone."

Need we say it? The three friends were only too delighted to go and share the adventures on the way. And so they all set out at dawn and walked eastwards all day long. Passing out of the city gate, they went through villages, crossed fields of wheat and reached a big forest at dusk of day. There they found a big clearing with a spreading banian tree in the centre. By the side of the tree there was a deep well with crystal clear water. The four friends camped there for the night. Leaving the carpenter's son to prepare the food they had brought, the other three friends set out to hunt for their next day's meal.

No sooner had the carpenter's son finished cooking,than he heard a tiger's roar behind him. Quickly snatching his long sharp sword, he turned about to meet the animal. But Lo! and behold! it was not a tiger that he saw, but

a giant as tall as the banian tree itself. The brave boy launched at the giant's tummy with his sword. The giant stepped aside, caught the hand that held the sword and gave him such a blow that he fell down in a swoon. After that, the giant ate up all the food, grew smaller in size and went down the well. For, that was where he lived and from where he had come. He was of a tribe of giants called Kamarupa, so called because they can take any form they like. The three friends came back only to find their food all eaten up and their comrade lying in a swoon. They sprinkled water on his face and restored his senses, when he told them the whole story. The next day the goldsmith's son agreed to stay back and cook the food. But the next day also the same thing happened. The friends came back, only to see their food eaten up and their comrade lying in a swoon. The blacksmith's son who took his turn on the third day did not fare better. He too was defeated by the giant who ate up all the food.

Bhima, thereupon, said he would stay back and defeat the giant. And so he did. The fight that ensued was fierce and long. When he saw that he had met his match, the giant suddenly grew as small as a man and jumped into the well. Bhima jumped in after him and continued to fight. The three youths came back and watched it. Truly, they said, this was perhaps how Bhima of old fought Dusshasana. For fourteen hours the battle continued until at last the giant admitted defeat. He admired his four adversaries so much that he offered his beautiful daughter, whose mother was a Gandharva lady as his bride. The prince declined politely and offered instead the carpenter's son as the bridegroom to be.

And so the carpenter's son married and stayed behind. The beauty of the girl and the bounty of wood in the forest pleased him immensely. The other three went forth east; the giant went with them.

Passing through villages, fields and jungles they reached

at dusk a very big town in which not a soul was living. The houses were new, the roads were still very good. Bhima and his friends were puzzled as to why a whole city had emptied out in this manner. In the centre of the city they saw a well on the rim of which a man was sitting all alone crying bitterly. This city, said he, is haunted by a giant who kills and eats one man every day. The people tried all ways they could think of, to kill him or drive him away. All efforts were in vain, until at last when a few hundred had died at his hands the others left the place in utter despair. Do not stay here at night, if you value your lives, the man advised them. The four comrades decided thereupon to stay at night and kill the giant.

And so they stayed. The three friends slept in the early part of the night while the giant kept vigil over them. At dead of night, the giant came, a huge form as tall as a tree, with hands as big as the lower branches of a jack fruit tree, nails like claws and blood shot eyes that seemed to emit fire. He was what is called a Nischachara, giants who walk about only at night. The giant got up to fight the Nishachara, increased his size to that of his enemy, caught him by the waist and threw him flat on the ground. On this the Nishachara grew bigger in size and stronger too. That was the secret of his strength. Every time he fell flat he would grow bigger and stronger than before. The giant then fought him without letting him fall on the ground. This was difficult and gradually he grew tired. So he glanced around, puzzled what to do. By this time, Bhima had woken up. Seeing his comrade in trouble, he rushed into the fray and gave the giant some rest. When Bhima was tired, the giant took his place. Between them they fought the whole night through. At break of day the Nishachara was killed. He fell like an oak tree across a building which was crushed to the ground by his weight. The King of the place heard the news from the man at the well and came fast

from his hiding place to greet the deliverers. He was so glad and grateful that he offered his pretty daughter in marriage to Bhima. But Bhima gracefully declined the kingly offer and said that the goldsmith's son was a better choice. The king agreed; gold was their chief ore in the place.

And so the goldsmith's son married and stayed behind, while the other three went forth on their way to the kingdom of the Lohars.

This time they came upon hilly country, with very thick forests, full of wild animals. They were on Kumaon hills. At night they camped in a small hamlet nestling on a hill, by the side of a forest. The jungle was so thick that you could not see more than a yard in front of you. The people of the place were living in terror. because of a man-eating lion, fifteen feet long and six feet high, which daily attacked and carried away some one or the other. Bhima and his comrades decided to stay awake, kill the lion and rid the place of this terror. The giant got the blacksmith's son to make for him an iron glove with spikes on it. Attached to the glove was an iron arm reaching up to his shoulder. When the lion attacked, he thrust the arm right down his throat. Bhima and the blacksmith's son fought the lion and prevented it from tearing the giant to pieces in its death struggle. Choking for breath, the lion fell dead in a couple of minutes. By that time, however, the three of them were very badly mauled. the jungle "vaid" smeared some green leaf paste over their wounds and dressed it with plantain leaves. To the surprise of the prince, this jungle medicine cured them much quicker than more elegant medicines in his father's palace would have done. The leader of the village had a lovely daughter, a dusky beauty, as charming as the daylight is at dawn. He offered her to Bhima as a bride. Bhima said that the blacksmith's son deserved to get her. He would be of great help to them in making arrow heads, swords and

ploughs.

And so the blacksmith's son married and stayed behind. Bhima and the giant went forth to the land of the Lohar king.

Passing lakes, swamps, rivers and rivulets through thick jungles and rich vegetation, they reached a river whose opposite bank they could not see. The mosquitoes there were as big as beetles. There were islands in the river. Probably they had reached Brahmputra and were in Assam. Walking up the river bank, they came upon a big town and learnt from the people that this was the kingdom of the Lohars. The women of the place were very very pretty. As it was late in the night, by the time they reached the gates of the town, they found the door closed against them. Bhima was ready to try and storm the gate by his famous "boar rush act." The giant said that then the whole capital would hear of their arrival which was not what they wanted. He, therefore, took Bhima on his shoulders and leaped over the thirty feet wall, landing inside as lightly as a peacock would have done. Not a sound was heard, not even a speck of dust was displaced. Walking carefully along the main road from the gate they saw on both sides many stately castles, huge, spreading and beautiful. Last of all in the centre of the town was a very large circular ground, with a castle that was by far the biggest of all, in the centre. It had eight storeys. Guards were walking round the grounds in two's, at intervals of every ten minutes. This was, of course, the palace of the king where the enchanting princess lived. But where? It would take several days to search the rooms. And before they found the princess they would be caught and imprisoned, if not killed.

There was a half moon that night playing hide and seek with white clouds flying like silk cotton in the sky. The night was so hot that they sweated even when they stood still. By the time they had walked round once, they felt

that all the five rivers of the Punjab were flowing down their back. At that moment, a beautiful girl came out to the seventh balcony to get a whiff of fresh air. She seemed to light up the whole balcony where she stood. The moon came out of the clouds to have a look at her. Bhima was stunned by her beauty. Dazzling as lightning on a moonless night, charming as Gul Mohur in full bloom on a far off hill—the girl's beauty beggared description. Bhima thanked his family gods for having brought him here and prayed to them for further success in his venture.

As he turned aside to talk to the giant, he found that the giant had disappeared. Where had he gone? Had he left him and gone away at this hour when he most needed him? No, he had not. Here he was coming. He had a bow and arrows, a long long string and a thick rope longer than the string. Bhima understood what to do. Waiting behind a tree for the guard to pass, he shot the arrow at the balcony where the princess stood. The arrow went round a pillar and fell back on the ground near his feet. He pulled at the string until the rope was round the pillar and he had both ends of the rope in his hands. They then tied the rope securely round a tree. Bhima now climbed step by step, arm by arm up the rope, jumped lightly on the balcony and stood bolt upright like a betel nut palm.

The princess was frightened by the arrow and ducked at the door. She was curious when the twine and rope passed round the pillar. The athletic climb of Bhima roused her wonder, his courage her admiration. The danger he risked made her anxious. His handsome form almost won her heart.

At that moment something happened. In this tall handsome strong youth she saw the charming prince who had appeared three nights in her dreams, when a voice had told her, "Here is Bhima, the prince of Benares, who will come to marry you." Was this her dream come true? Who knows!

"Who are you?" "Why have you climbed like a thief?" "Don't you know this means death to you?" She showered a series of questions.

"I am Bhima, the prince of Benares. I have come to claim you as my princess and queen to be. I have gone through so many dangers that one more would make no difference. Call your guards, if that is how you feel," replied Bhima.

"That is not how I feel," replied the romantic girl. "The family deity has already told me in my dream that you are to be my prince. You are my dream come true. But please go down now. Come tomorrow. The guards will soon come and spoil everything," she pleaded.

"Let them come," said Bhima.

"No, that is not the way. You are brave and strong I know. But believe me. I have greater powers over my father than all the armies in all the lands."

"What will you have me do?"

"Come tomorrow and I give you my word. Everything will be as you wish. Now please hurry."

Bhima was unwilling to obey. Something in the girl told him, however, that she was telling the truth and would be able to do as she wished. He went down and hid behind the trees. Just then the guards came round. They saw the rope and reported the matter. All the guards were roused. But no one was caught. The king was informed as soon as he got up. He came tearing with rage to his daughter's chamber.

Chitra, for that was her name, smiled and embraced him, made him sit at ease and playing with his hair told him the whole story. "You promised," she said, "to marry me to the man who braved such a deed. Now that some one has done it why do you lose your temper and forget your promise, father?" she asked.

"I know all that," he said. "But he comes like a thief."

"He is no common thief, father, but the prince of Benares, Bhima, the strong man. Here he comes by the

road, let him explain."

The king looked out from the balcony. There was Bhima coming along like a rising sun. The guards were asked to let him in. After convincing himself that he truly was Bhima, the king said: "I had always wanted Bhima of Benares, whose fame has reached all the eight corners of the earth, should be my son-in-law. Now that it has come true, let us rejoice."

Bhima was married with all the pomp and show that a great king would arrange for the marriage of his only daughter.

The prince and the princess then returned to Benares, collecting their three friends on the way. The giant, of course, was all along with them. The king of Benares being old, crowned his son as the king of the land and retired from life to prepare himself for the next. The three friends became Governors of three provinces and the giant returned to his forest.

THE COLONY OF YAKSHIS

ONE thousand and odd years ago Cranganore on the Kerala coast used to be a big centre of trade. Arabs and Jews, Moors and Romans, jostled each other in the market, buying and selling things, making and losing money. As the place was rich, there were many artisans of repute in the place who made ornaments of gold and silver, decorative articles of ivory and sandal. The cloth they wove was finest of the fine. Into that town came one day a fearsome person whose dress called out aloud that he had plenty of money. He wanted seven artisans, so he said, to take to his abode in the hills and work for him. The artisans eager to make money quick, forgot the fear that his egg-shaped head, sloping narrow forehead, slanting eyes, wide nostrils, and barrel shaped body had created in them. They vied with each other to be selected. The man chose seven heavy weight artists, made them swear in the temple to serve him till the work was finished and returned to his home in the hills. The better artists, who were left behind were amazed at the choice. "That man from the jungle what does he know of art!" some said to themselves. Others found comfort in the sneer: "he has more money than brains!"

Meanwhile, the lord of the jungle reached his home in the hills with the seven artists. It was a very big house whose walls were made of wood and whose roof was thatched with palmira leaves. On the southeast side of the building there was a semi-detached set of apartments, surrounded by a very high wall and a higher gate. This was the place set apart for the seven artisans. They did not like the look of the whole affair. But the work room was a real pleasure. It contained everything that the heart of an artisan desired. The room leading from it was their

bed-room. Its appearance rekindled their fears. It was a small room with one huge cot that filled up half the room. On a wall-shelf was a goblet and a drinking vessel —buz—that was all the furniture in that room. "You will sleep here and live in these apartments till your work is finished. You should on no account go outside. If you, so much as step outside you will be killed." The men were amazed by this sudden change in his tone. "Now then," he shouted, "get to work. At night you will get your food out of this goblet. Don't stare at me like that. It is a magic goblet and there will be enough food in it to last all seven of you for twenty four hours." They were completely frightened by this time. But what could they do now ? They were entirely in his hands by their oath and the distance from home.

The whole day long they worked very hard to finish their allotted job and get away as quickly as they could. Without even stopping to take food, they went on working until the sun had gone to rest and the fading light prevented them from seeing well. Tired and frightened they went to the goblet and drank the milk. It was the most delicious drink they ever tasted in their life. The goblet filled itself as often as it was emptied, until all the seven had their fill of milk. In a short while, the drink made them strangely happy and they forgot their worries. It made them sleepy too and they went to bed. Strange to say, the bed was big enough for only six men. The seventh had to sleep on the ground.

At dead of night a big brown weasel came in, bit the right toe of the man on the ground and without paining him in the least drunk up all his blood. The man died in his sleep. When his soul left the body, there was thunder and lightning. The jungle king came in and said: "Did you have your fill my dear?" Upon this, the weasel became a dazzling beauty and replied sweetly: "Yes, my lord. There was plenty of blood in this man who died." The king answered: "And there is plenty more in all the

rest. They were specially selected for you, my dear. Now let us dispose of the body." He lifted the dead man and walked out with the damsel, opened a big wooden box built on the ground in the main building, put the body in it and closed it up.

The six men awoke refreshed and happy. They missed the seventh man. Where had he gone? What happened to him? They did not know. They could not tell. Moreover, the king of the jungle came in just then and drove them back to work. They worked harder that day, for their anxiety to get away had increased.

At night they drank the milk and went to sleep. Alas! the cot would hold only five. The sixth man slept on the ground. At dead of night the weasel came and drank up his life blood. There was thunder and lightning when he died. The king came in, removed the dead body and locked it up in the wooden box built on the ground.

Five men awoke refreshed from sleep. The drink had made them forget their worries. But where was the sixth man who had slept on the floor? They did not know. They could not find out. The king came in and hustled them off to work. They tried so hard to work, but could not make much progress, as they were sad, puzzled and frightened.

That night too the same thing happended. The drink left the men in a trance. The cot would hold only four. The fifth man who slept on the ground was drained of his blood by the weasel and his body was locked up in the box built on the ground. This was repeated the next night and the next, until the five men became four and three and then there were only two.

At this stage, the youngest artisan, Keshav was his name, did not drink the milk. He kept awake and saw all that happened. When the king and the beautiful woman removed the dead body he slipped out all unnoticed and hid himself beside a big broad palmira tree. He saw the body being locked up and he saw the girl come back.

She took the shape of a huge bat and flew up to the top of the palmira tree. Keshav now understood the whole mystery. The weasel, the bat and the damsel were all the same person, a yakshi, a vampire who could take these forms, who could not be killed and who lived on the blood of animals and men, mostly men.

Trembling with fear, he ran away from the place as fast as his shaking legs, the uneven forest ground and the darkness of the night, would let him run. He went on in this manner, running and walking and running, for two hours on end. The night had reached its fourth quarter. The tired man decided to cry halt for the night. He got upon a bodhi tree, to save himself from wild beasts and settled down for a short sleep, before the rising of the sun.

But, sleep he could not. A voice as sweet as that which silver bangles make on lovely arms, called out to him to come down. It was the yakshi, in the form of a seducing beauty. She had followed him all the way without his knowing it. Come down, my beloved. Come down and make me your wife; and I shall be your slave for life—she pleaded with him. Keshav of course had guessed by this time that yakshis are more dangerous than ghosts with fearsome aspects and man-eating tendencies. He refused to come down. She changed her tone. Threatening him with awful death, she shouted at him. Keshav sat firm unmoved, as much by threats as by entreaties. He knew that no evil spirit would get up a bodhi tree, where he was safe. He had only to wait for the dawn when he could come down without fear of any afreet.

A king who was hunting early, passed that way. Seeing him, the yakshi acted the part of a deserted wife and appealed for justice at his hands, a damsel in distress, an astonishing beauty at that, visibly moved the king who demanded an explanation of Keshav. In his haste to get rid of the whole affair, Keshav said: "If your lordship pity her so much, your majesty may take her and give her

refuge. I for one, do not want her. Dandayudhapani, for that was the name of the king, was not unwilling to add a matchless eighth to his harem of seven beauties. He took her with him and went his way.

Waiting long enough to make sure that the yakshi had left him for good, Keshav came down from the tree, looked all round and started walking. He had lost his way and so proceeded along the first foot-path in the jungle that he came across. By and by he also reached the same country where the yakshi had been taken and made a queen. He disguished himself and lived as an artisan, working only for a living, spending all the rest of his time practising unearthly magic known as Indrajala. That was, he knew, the only way to avenge the death of his comrades. Magic has to be met by magic.

The first thing that the Rani did at the palace was to drink the life blood of the palace guard and dispose the body in the palace of the first Rani. The king was very sad and annoyed at the Rani whom he half suspected of the crime. The next day another guard died and his body was found at the door of the second Rani.The third night's dead body was at the third Rani's door and the fourth at that of the fourth. So on and so forth the mysterious deaths went on until in seven day's time all the seven Ranis were involved, in the death of the guards. In his anger, sadness and despair the king lost his powers of clear thinking and squarely blamed his seven queens of putting his guards to death. The yakshi fed this belief by subtle suggestions and later by plain accusations. All the seven queens were shut up in an underground chamber at the border of his kingdom.

It so happened that at this time every queen was big with child. They delivered seven sons in seven days. Afraid that the king, like Kansa of old, would kill the babies, the dewan managed to leave them in the care of trustworthy jungle folk. The youngest queen was the dewan's niece. Her baby son fell to the lot of Keshav who

had now become famous for his learning in medicine, astrology, super magic and manthras.

By his Indrajala, or super magic, the boy grew into a youth of twenty years in the short span of twenty months. Tall like a palm, with a forehead like a half moon, eyes sparkling with life, broad shouldered and narrow hipped like a lion, with long arms that could pull a bow to its fullest extent, every one who saw Vijay asked at once: "Who is he? Which gothra is proud to possess him? Who are his lucky parents? The king also heard of him, tried him in the tournaments where Vijay defeated the strongest, the swiftest and the cleverest in games of skill and strength, of guile and brains. Naturally, therefore, he was appointed as a Captain in the Army. No one knew or guessed that he was the king's son. No one, that is, except the queen who noticed the resemblance and guessed the truth. "He must be destroyed or he will destroy me," thought the queen. "I made a mistake in letting the seventh man go. He is surely behind this trick. Do not leave the remains of a sore, the remains of a debt or the remains of an enemy is the good old proverb which I failed to observe"—she said to herself.

Outwardly, she pretended to like the captain so much that she requested the king to make Vijay the captain of the home guards. "You have snatched the words from the tip of my tongue," said the unsuspecting king. A few days later, the yakshi, one evening, shut herself in the Krodhalaya, the apartment in palaces set apart for queens to retire when they are in an angry mood. The king was anxious. He went in to see her lying on the ground, wearing a torn saree, wet with tears, her neck, ear-lobes and hands bereft of ornaments. In his anxiety to pacify the queen he promised to do whatever she wanted to be done. "Send Vijay to my parents' house across the mountains and bring news of my kith and kin. He should be back here in twenty-four hours or he will meet with his death. Promise me this," she told the king. The promise, having

already been given in advance, there was nothing left to be done except obey the instructions. Vijay left on his mission. The Queen watched him ride straight to his death until he disappeared from her sight. The youth remembered his guardian's words and went to him first before leaving the kingdom.

Keshav received him with open arms. When he heard of his mission he knitted his brows and grew thoughtful. The time has come, the guardian thought, to tell him the whole story which he had kept to himself all the while. Vijay could not believe his ears. Can a person smile and smile and yet be your mortal enemy, he wondered. His twenty years' growth in twenty months' time was harder still to believe. Keshav brought out seven paddy seeds, sowed them on the ground saying: "These are the seeds of the 'King of the jungle', Vanaspathy. See, how they grow." Just as his guardian predicted, the seven seeds sprouted into seedlings in a trice and became full grown plants in seven minutes. Vijay was given a horse whose speed would have been the envy of the steeds of Nala. He was also taught, like Nala again of old, to converse with the animal, and birds. Lastly, Keshav threw a rope in the air whose top disappeared in the heavens and asked Vijay to climb up to the top. There he saw all the land miles and miles around, in the midst of which Keshav described to him the abode of the yakshis. Vijay came down ready to go forth on his errand.

The horse that carried him galloped so fast that the forest on both sides looked like one continuous green screen; the separate trees he could not see. Climbing hill after hill, each one higher than the other, he reached a very high plateau whose beauty enchanted him. The air was clear and cold, laden with a mixed perfume of sandal, cardamon, cinnamon, eucalyptus and scented flowers, that was as intoxicating as the scenery was breath-taking. Here, where every prospect pleases, was the colony of the dreaded yakshis.

THE YAKSHIS

He was brought before the king to whom he delivered the letter, the contents of which had been cunningly altered by Keshav's magic, without even opening the epistle. It now read:

"This youth is our friend and ally. Treat him like a King. Teach him our secrets and send him back with the water of life."

The King and the Queen treated Vijay like a royal guest, showed him all the beauties and wonders of the place. He noticed the box where he was sure the six artisans must have been locked up, because the king did not mention the box when he pointed out every thing else in the room. At night, Vijay opened the box, took out the bones and tied them up in the sack he had brought. Placing the bag as a pillow, he slept the sleep of one who had done something for the day. The next night there was a jungle dance of the yakshis, it being a full moon night. The King and Queen and all the guards left early afternoon to the dancing ground.

Vijay wandered about in a thoughtful mood, wondering what else he could do to destroy the yakshis and save the people. Presently he found himself in a very big place, which looked like a game sanctuary, so full it was of wild animals, big and small, fierce and mild. His knowledge of their various tongues proved very helpful in this place. He learnt from them that the life spirit of yakshis—they have no souls—are deposited in these animals. You cannot kill a yakshi, unless you kill the animal concerned. So he lay about killing them right and left. The whole dancing place was littered with the dead bodies of yakshis, which withered away to dust as soon as they touched mother earth.

Taking one pea hen in which the Queen's life was deposited, the bag of bones and the vessel of magic water, Vijay returned victorious to Keshav's place. There a great welcome awaited him. All the seven Ranis with their six sons had been brought together by Keshav. Great was the

rejoicing in the place. The bones were restored to live artisans by the help of the magic water.

At the palace, the king was impatiently awaiting Vijay's return. Seven minutes before the appointed time, Vijay arrived with the pea hen under his arm. The king was pleased. The Queen attempted a smile, but went deadly pale at the sight of the pea hen and finally fainted. When the Queen fainted the bird also fainted. Vijay told the king: "Oh! lord. See how the pea hen was fainted along with the Queen. I shall wake up the hen and watch Oh! lord! how the Queen will also regain her senses." He did so and the Queen too awoke from her swoon. She tried to grab the bird. Vijay would not let it go. In this struggle the pea hen broke its leg and the Queen became lame. The truth gradually dawned upon the king. Is the Queen yakshi? She could be. As he debated this in his mind, Vijay wrung the neck of the bird and yakshi fell dead. Her body withered away in front of their eyes.

At this juncture the seven queens, the six princes and the seven artisans appeared on the scene along with Keshav. Great was the king's gladness, surprise, repentence, relief and gratitude at this happy ending of the sad episode in all their lives, and they lived on as before.

The land of the yakshis who were destroyed was then occupied by human beings and very soon became a thriving place, rich in forest wealth that was brought down to Cranganore. There the Arabs and the Jews, the Moors and Romans jostled one another, buying and selling things, making and losing money. The story of the seven artisans became a legend—a grandmother's tale.

TARKA NAGARI

THE real name of the town nobody knows. Much less do people know where it was. Northerners say it was in the south; Easterners say it was in the west; others say it was somewhere in the middle; and so on and so forth. No one is sure about its whereabouts. So let it remain. All that we need to know is that it was nicknamed Tarka Nagari or the town of argumentation. This name was bestowed because of the genius of the people to conduct mustard-splitting arguments. Once a stranger came to the town to buy some grains. The shopkeeper measured it out on the reverse of the measure. The man protested. An altercation ensued. A crowd gathered. The man appealed to the crowd. They decided that grain should be measured on the side of the measure. The poor stranger had to go away with half a dozen grains that had somehow stuck to the side of the circular measure. That was the type of place Tarka Nagri was. There are slokas in India's several languages celebrating the town's famous deeds in this line; but that is all by the way.

One evening as the sun was trying hard with its weak hands* to stop the darkness from rushing in, a stranger came to Tarka Nagari. The name of the stranger nobody knows. Much less do people know where he came from. His nickname, however, every one knows. It was Nakhle-Akhal, which means Mr. Imitation Brains. Why he was so called will become clear as this story proceeds. He had come to meet his old friend, philosopher and guide—Hoshiar Khan. Why he was so called will also become apparent as the story proceeds.

Nakhle Akhal, true to his name, had completely forgotten the address of his friend. Proceeding, however, with a

* Karam (Sanskrit) means hand and rays.

kind of homing instinct that pigeons have, he reached the neighbourhood of Hoshiar Khan's house. There he lost his bearings and had to ask some boys playing in the streets where Hoshiar Khan lived.

"Kaka," said the boys, "we shall show you where he lives. But first tell us what you will give us for the trouble. We give nothing for nothing."

"I shall give you sweets my boys, if you tell me where he lives."

"How much sweets?" asked the boys.

"The biggest lumps, my dear boys, the biggest lumps of sweets shall be yours' if you will show me where he lives."

"Agreed," said the boys all in one voice, and took him in hand. Leading him along high lanes and by-lanes, through serpentine lines and dead straight ones, they brought him at last to the place of Hoshiar Khan, which happened to be just a couple of doors away from where they were playing. Nakhle Akhal had sense enough to see that the boys had cheated him. But what could he do? A promise is a promise which one has to keep, whatever may be the result. Hoshiar Khan was not at home. In the meantime, therefore, they went to the sweet meat shop across the road, to buy some sweets. He bought one rupee worth of sweets and offered it to them. Those were the days when you could get a good deal of sweets for a mere rupee, so that there was enough and more to fill the greedy stomachs of all the boys in the group. But would they take it? No, they would not. Instead they said: "You promised us the biggest lumps. We want the biggest lumps. Nothing but the biggest lumps." Mr. Imitation Brains doubled the quantity and bought two rupees worth of sweets. That too was not enough for them. "We want," they shouted, "the bigegst lumps, the biggest lumps." "Would sweets for rupees three suffice?" "No; not at all." "What about sweets for four rupees?" "No. The biggest lumps. We want the biggest lumps; the biggest lumps", they went on

chanting as if it was a prayer, or mantra. This strange auction went on and on, until Nakhle Akhal had bought up all the sweets in the shop and still the boys cried for more.

Annoyed, sad and puzzled Nakhle Akhal looked around in helpless despair, when to his greatest delight he saw, as a sinking ship sees the signal from a rescue vessel, Hoshiar Khan coming up the street. A big made man, who really looked like two men rolled into one, he commanded immediate respect over all Tarka Nagari. At a glance, he took in the whole scene and he said to himself: Mischief thou art afoot. Every one in Tarka Nagari had great respect for his very sharp brains. The boys were subdued at the very sight of this "double Roti" of a man.

When he heard the story, Hoshiar Khan went inside the shop, returned all the sweets and came outside with just one rupee worth of sweets. He took all the five boys, who by the way, were his nephews, inside his house and told them you shall have the biggest lumps, don't worry. Dividing the sweets into five parts, each bigger than the other, he called up the eldest boy and asked him:

"What are these?"

"Lumps of sweets."

"Good, which is the biggest lump?"

"This one."

"Very good. Take it and go."

The boy took it and left the room. He had got the biggest lump, did he not? How could he grumble? The second boy was called into the room and asked to choose the biggest lump. He too got the biggest lump and went out without a murmur. The third and the fourth boys too got the biggest lumps and cleared out silent quiet and quick. The last fellow had no choice. He took the only lump that was left and went his way, a sadder and a wiser boy.

Outside the house they fell to quarrelling with each other, each one blaming the rest for being too greedy.

When Hoshiar Khan looked out of the window to see what was the noise about, they melted away like snow before the rising sun.

Hoshiar Khan warned Nakhle Akhal against the people of Tarka Nagari. "Twisters to the last man," said he, "they will take the milk out of your coffee."

"I know," replied Mr. Imitation Brains. "I lost my horse and my merchandise of silk and valuable articles in a bargain as soon as I entered the gate of the City."

"How did that happen?"

"Well, you see, I had decided to leave my place, come here and live with your help. And so I had placed costly silk and other valuables which I could sell here and start a business. Inside the gates of the town, I stopped at a coffee shop for refreshments. As I sat there on a bench by the side of the road, a butcher across the road came up and pointing at my horse asked me whether I would sell it; and, if so, what price I would take for it. It was an old horse which I had, in any case, intended to sell. But knowing that your people are famous hagglers, I asked a very big price of four hundred rupees. 'Agreed' said the man and untethering the horse, led it away with the merchandise and all that was on it. I protested that I had sold only the horse. 'Did you not say merely that?' he asked. Yes, I said."

"Did you say 'that' without the bundles on it?"

"No, but who would have thought?"

"There is no question of what you thought. It is what you said that matters."

"I protested. There was an argument. A crowd gathered. I appealed to the crowd. They agreed with the butcher. I lost my all, for the pittance of four hundred rupees. That is the tale."

Hoshiar Khan laughed so loud that the rafters shook. "I know the rogue, he said. Is he not a pumpkin-shaped fellow, whose face was made in a hurry?"

"Exactly," replied Nakhle Akhal.

"All right then. I shall settle it. It is too late now. We shall go tomorrow."

The next morning when the butcher had just returned from the slaughter house and laid out all his wares, Hoshiar Khan and his friend walked into his shop. The butcher greeted Hoshiar Khan with a silken submissive smile and said:

"What shall you be wanting, Sir?"

"I want heads."

"How many Sir? Three, four, six? Why Sir, I shall give you all the heads I have. Do not worry about the price. It will be cheaper at the wholesale rate."

"All right then, said Hoshiar Khan, pack them up. The butcher collected all the goats' heads in the shop. There were twenty-six of them, but he only charged for the two dozen."

"Here you are Sir. All the heads in this shop are yours."

"No, said Hoshiar Khan. What about your own head and that of your assistant? Are they not heads? Were they not in the room?" asked the Khan.

The butcher's face became uglier than ever, if that was possible. "Who would have thought?" he started saying.

"No question of thinking," said the Khan. "It is what you said that goes. Did you make an exception of your own head?"

The butcher remembered his own words of yesterday and understood that this was tit for tat. He tried to protest. A crowd gathered. He appealed to the crowd who had helped him yesterday. "But," said they, "a law is a law. You gave your word and shall keep it."

The assistant, meanwhile, left the shop in a hurry. The butcher begged and cringed, he wailed and he cried. He fell at their feet and asked for mercy.

"Mercy cannot be one-sided," said Hoshiar Khan. "If you show mercy, you will have mercy."

"To whom shall this poor man show mercy? Mercy is for rich men"—pleaded the butcher.

Hoshiar Khan pointed to his friend and said: "To this man. Return him his goods. The horse you may keep."

Nakhle Akhal took back his things and returned with Hoshiar Khan as happy as a squirrel that had lost a nut and found it again.

A little later in the morning, Hoshiar Khan went out to his place of work. Before going he warned Mr. Imitation Brains not to try and sell his wares in his absence. "If you do, you will loose them all. The people here have such glib tongues. They can convince you that jaggery is sweeter on one side than on the other." Nakhle Akhal readily agreed and kept away from all people.

Towards noon, however, he thought he would have a shave. There was no harm in that. None can dupe you in the cost of a shave. At the most they may charge you double the price. That can be paid. So he went to the shaving saloon. In those days it was called a barber's shop.

There he saw five people waiting. They were haggling about the price of a shave and could not come to an agreement. The barber sow in Nakhle Akhal a man whose head was an empty shell. He greeted him with such a broad smile that the corners of his lips touched the lobes of his ears on either side. Nakhle Akhal was flattered. He told the barber:

"I want a shave. Don't worry about the price. I shall give you enough to please you."

"Certainly Sir, certainly," said the barber. The shave was very soon over. Nakhle gave him four annas. The barber would not look at it. He gave him eight. The barber spurned it. A rupee, he gave. The barber only laughed. "You promised to please me, Sir. Is my pleasure to be bought for a rupee?" said the barber. This strange auction went on. Nakhle gave fifty rupees and yet the barber argued still. He appealed to the crowd. They sided with the barber. Poor Nakhle, had no more money left. Promising to bring some more, he somehow managed to keep

Tarka Nagari

his shirt on his back and leave the place.

By this time, it was dusk and the setting sun was trying hard to prevent darkness from rushing in. At home, Hoshiar Khan was waiting for his friend. When he heard the story, he laughed louder than before. This time a crack appeared on the rafters. "Never mind," he said, "I will settle it."

Late at night, dressed as announcers of the king, the two of them went to the street where the barber lived, announcing by beat of drum:

"Rejoice all of you citizens. The king has had a son."

All the people in the street came out of their houses and obediently expressed their joy at the event. No one dared to be seen indifferent. Our friend, the barber, too came out. Hoshiar Khan singled him out and pointedly asked him: "Well, my brother, are you not pleased? Why do you look so glum?" The barber got frightened. If word went round that he was indifferent at the happy event in the king's household, he would be in trouble. "I am pleased, my brother, doubly pleased," he asserted loud enough for all to hear, far louder than Khan's accusation.

"If you are pleased, said Hoshiar Khan, doubly pleased as you say, pay me hundred rupees right now, or I will tell the king."

"How is that and why?" asked the barber. He was puzzled but a bell rang somewhere in his brain saying I have heard this phrase before.

Hoshiar Khan took off his disguise. The crowd dropped their mounts in surprise and stood aside to see the fun.

"Did you not charge this man fifty rupees for being pleased but once, this afternoon?"

"He did. He did. We saw him do it," said four witnesses from the crowd who were there when Nakhle was swindled and whom the barber had charged twice the price of a shave.

The barber was at his wits' end. He had caught a

leopard by its tail. He could not hold on to it nor could he let it go without danger to his life. He agreed to pay hundred rupees and brought them out. Hoshiar Khan gave him back fifty, and four annas too for the shave and returned home. Nakhle Akhal's eyes were wide with wonder and looked as big as that of an owl.

Returning home, Hoshiar Khan advised his friend: "In doing business, strike a bargain in exact terms, never use metaphors, idioms and such other poetic usages."

"I know that to my cost," confessed Nakhle. "It was such language that forced me to run away from home." Then he narrated the beginning of this story.

At home he had lost a wager, by which he was to give his friend whatever the latter touched first in his house. He was sure to touch the box of jewels and precious stones which would ruin Nakhle. "That," said Hoshiar Khan, "can be easily settled."

Next day they went back, built an attic to which there was no approach: climbed on top of it by a ladder, placed the box far enough to appear to be hidden, but not too far to be seen; laid the ladder flat on the ground away from the attic, half hidden from sight. The friend came. He saw the newly built attic and espied the jewel box too.

"Ha! Ha!" he said. "You thought you could cheat me, did you?"

Looking around for some means to climb to the attic, his eyes fell on the ladder.

"Just like you, Nakhle"—he laughed. "You can never do a trick to perform. See what I can do now."

So saying, he picked up the ladder and placing it against the attic, began to climb it.

"Stop," shouted Hoshiar Khan. The man stood still with his leg half raised, astonished at the thundering voice. Hoshiar Khan continued:

"The ladder is the first thing you touched in this house. The ladder is yours. Take it and remove yourself from this place as quick as you can. Never more shall you darken this doorway by your hateful presence."

BLACK MAGIC

KING Vikramaditya of Ujjain lived more than a thousand years ago. Yet even today there is a magic in his name for every Indian. Like "Open Sesame," the name of Vikrama opens out a treasure-house full of some of the most enchanting stories told anywhere in the world. Strong and kind, wise and modest, just but merciful, the King gathered around him, not merely material jewels, but nine jewels of the greatest men in the land. The weal of the people was for him, in all matters, the main-spring of kingly acts. In order to find out how his people lived, he used to go out at nights, disguised as various persons and wander into every corner and hovel in his Capital. On one such nocturnal peregrination, he noticed, just outside the Capital, on the other side of the river a newly built hut, by the side of the Smashan, or cremation ground. It appeared to be all ablaze; there was so much fire in front of it. His curiosity being aroused, the King tied his clothes on his head, swam across noiselessly, donned his clothes again at the other shore, approached the hut cautiously, and hiding behind a nearby bush, watched what was proceeding at the place. What he saw there froze his blood, although he was a brave man quite accustomed to seeing many eerie sights during his solitary wanderings in the dark.

In front of the hut four fires were burning—east, west, north and south. A mud pot of fire hung overhead from a tripod stand. Amidst these five fires, sat a man clothed in a leopard skin—a man with long matted hair and a flowing beard. His left hand was sticking out, straight, parallel to the ground. A wooden stick with a curved piece across it (called Yoga Danda) was supporting the arm. Sitting cross-ledged, he was looking straight at something beyond the horizon. With the

right middle finger placed along the nose and the palm of his hand closing his mouth, the other fingers were holding tight, two on each side, both his nostrils. He was practising some terrific austerity for some purpose, which became clear by the drama enacted in front of him. There lay flat on its back a dead body, just turned black. It was clearly a corpse rescued from the cremation ground before it was burnt. On the dead man's chest, a man was seated astride, uttering some manthras. In his left hand were some big red petals, which he kept thrusing into the mouth of the dead body, one by one, exhorting it to get up: "Rise my son, rise," he was saying after each manthra. It was a ceremony of raising a corpse, or Frankenstein, that the King was witnessing. But why? Whom did they want to kill in this horrible manner? A man killed by a "raised corpse" would perish for eternity in hell. Who could be such a hated enemy of these men? The king was puzzled. Just then, the man sitting on the corpse turned towards the place where the king was hiding, as if he sensed a disturbance from that quarter. And then the king understood. He himself was the object of their vengeance. The man was a high ex-official under him whom he had dismissed for bribery, corruption and cruelty towards the people. The man was clearly guilty and the punishment was just. But wise king Vikrama knew that even the most hardened criminal considered himself as misunderstood and wrongly punished.

He turned back to go and consult his ministers regarding the steps to be taken to stop this heinous act. One had to be careful, for people at large, who go by outward appearance only, might already have mistaken this man to be a holy personage. Vikrama, therefore, turned back to go. But he could not move even a step forward. The poojari had sensed the presence of an intruder and had by his magic turned Vikrama into a big black dog. The king stayed on at the place, hoping that his wise

ministers would find some way of rescuing him.

At the palace, the ministers were greatly concerned at the King's disappearance. Dhanwantiri, one of the nine jewels at the palace, who was a great physician, announced that the King was ill and would not be able to give audience or appear in public for a few days. People were sad but satisfied. Varahamihira, another gem at the palace, discovered the King's fate by means of his knowledge of astrology. He called his twin sons and told them what had happened and added:

"I shall turn you into a pair of spotted deer. You go to the hut and frisk about. The dog will chase you. Lead him on to the river and jump in. The dog will follow. Make straight for the opposite bank. Be careful because the magician will try to kill you. He cannot use his magic on you or on the dog when you are by his side. Bodily injury by direct attack alone is the danger to avoid. That too he can inflict only while you are on the other side of the river. Once you cross midstream you are safe. He dare not come beyond it. Are you prepared to undergo this risk, my sons? Remember you may loose your life."

"We are ready father," they said. They were not afraid because they had no thought about their own selves. Said the minister to himself: "fear is a sign of selfishness."

Everything went smoothly according to the plan. The three of them were in the river swimming, as it were, faster than fate. A few more yards and they would have crossed midstream. At that moment, the necromancer who was idly watching the sport, noticed that both the dear had no left ear. When men are turned to animals by magic, some part or other will be missing. That part is left in safety as a means of restoring them to human form. He realized what was happening, turned himself into an eagle and shot out at them and plunged down on the deer. He plucked out one eye of the elder deer

and rose to make a second sweep. It was too late. The three had crossed the middle of the stream and he was helpless. He returned disappointed, but doubly determined to wreak his vengeance on the king, once the austerities were complete.

After the king was restored to his former self, he and his counsellors held a conference as to what they should do to destroy the enemy. "Magic has to be met by greater magic," said Varahamihira. "There is only one person in the world who can fight black magic. She is the princess of Manipur. If your Majesty would make her the Queen, all will be well." The King was more than ready. The princess was already the choice of his heart. He was enamoured of her beauty even by hearsay. The hearsay had reported that she was so charming that even the moon felt inferior in her presence. The moon that was her face was always full. It never waned. "This has to be accomplished in thirty days, continued Varahamihira. "The man there is performing those rites for a mandala, which lasts for forty days. Ten days are already over."

Vikramaditya set out to Manipur disguised as a pilgrim and all alone. Walking all day long, stopping only for refreshments, sleeping only four yamas every night, the king reached the Capital of Manipur after eleven days' journey. As it was already late in the night, the gates of the city were closed. The king slept outside under a spreading banyan tree. In the middle of the night some robbers who had stolen jewels from the palace came that way, with the king's soldiers close on their heels. To throw them off the scent, the robbers dropped part of their loot in Vikrama's bag and fled. He was caught and brought before the court.

Although he was innocent, evidence was against him. To announce himself as a king when he was accused of theft would be inviting ridicule and doubling the sentence. Vikrama, therefore, yielded to their judgment

depending upon his resourcefulness to get out of it. They sold him as a slave to an oil merchant.

His personality, intelligent talk, diligence and capacity for hard work were so great that in one week's time the merchant of his own accord gave him his liberty. He treated him henceforth as an employee and not as a slave. Meanwhile, time was running out and Vikrama was nowhere near to marrying the princess.

One evening he heard that a lovely marble tank built for the princess had just been finished, but that no one dared to bathe in it. On the steps of the tank artisans had carved the story of the epic fight that lasted a thousand years between an elephant and a crocodile; a famous story from the Hindu Puranas: Gajendramoksham. In this "comic" in marble, they had made a mistake, on account of which the tank was considered inauspicious. No one who valued his life dared to bathe in it. Vikramaditya saw the chance of his life in this event and offered to bathe in the pond and break the evil spell. The king's guards brought the bold stranger to the court and announced his intentions.

The king took pity upon this tall, broad shouldered, long-armed youth, who held his head high and walked as gracefully as a full grown lion. He tried to dissuade him from this rash act. "You are, I can very well see, strong and brave, my lad. But here we are up against unknown and unseen forces, whose laws we do not understand," said the king. Vikrama had, however, made up his mind: "Neck or nothing" was his mood at that moment. A host of feminine eyes were watching him through the numerous apertures in the marble screen behind the throne. Vikrama was sure that the princess also would be there. And there she was. Those marble screens in oriental palaces are excellent devices for seeing without being seen. The princess saw Vikrama and gasped at his astonishing personality. "This is surely Vikramaditya whom I have, in my heart of hearts, already

accepted as my Lord and my life. There cannot be two such persons"—she said to herself. "I have heard it from my maids that he has gone on a pilgrimage. And it was as a pilgrim, that this man, this combination of the gods of war and love, was found in the City."

The King having at last given his consent to this stubborn youth, Vikramaditya retired to the marble tank and sat there for a long time in meditation. A yama before midnight he started singing. The raga he sang was the famous Deepak. As its strains swelled and filled the whole place, men and women woke up and came out. Animals pricked up their ears. Birds opened their eyes. The trees nodded to time. And finally all the lights were brightly lit by the magic of the song. In this brilliant light before the eyes of men, women, beasts and birds, Vikrama took a jack knife dive into the tank and rose up at the other end. He plunged in again and rose up at the near end. Thrice he repeated this "dive and swim" ritual along the full length of the tank. Then standing at the head he dived thrice and came up straight without moving an inch. This done, he came back on top and sat crossed legged with the right foot on top of the left knee or Veerasana, as it is known, and sang a mangala (or invocation) in which all the concourse joined. The king was mighty pleased that this adventurous youth was religious and talented as well.

"I do not know what I can give you," said the King. "What will you have, my son?"

"Your Majesty," replied the stranger, "I am repaid by the pleasure I have given you. Let not that gift be spoilt by material presentations."

"Still, please accept something as the token of our pleasure," pleaded the king.

"If your Majesty would have it so, please give me an invitation to the feast of the princess's Swayamyara"—(wedding by choice)—he requested.

"That is easily granted. You will attend not only the

Black Magic

festival but be present at the Swayamyara ceremony also, as a guest," was the king's offer. Vikrama was immensely pleased.

Even now, in spite of favourable circumstances, Vikramaditya did not dare to disclose that he was one of the greatest kings of Hindustan. The princess, Wanavallari, was now sure that he was really Vikramaditya. None else could have the supreme self-assurance to win her on his own and not as a king, was her silent judgment.

The Swayamyara was to be seven days' hence. Wanavallari could not wait so long to get her intuition confirmed from the lips of her beloved himself. That night when the half moon had risen half way up the sky, she went out dressed in the robes of her maid Usha, heavily hooded with a silk Ghunghat. Outside the palace on a river's lip sat Vikrama gazing thoughtfully at the Himalaya range. He was wondering at the sublimity of this mountain which was "so supereminently sublime that even the mother of the world was willing to call him father." A shadow fell in front of him and brought him down to earth. He turned around to see the intruder and nearly fell backwards at what he saw. There, standing before him, was a beauty who looked like the daughter of the Himalaya in human form. a maiden as light as a bamboo leaf, graceful as a swan, charming as the moon, with a frightened look in her eyes reminding one of a gazzelle's eyes. He stood up and before he knew what he was doing, addressed her thus:

"Oh! beauty of beauties, lotus of lotuses, to what do I owe this rare piece of luck?" he asked the dazzling damsel.

"Do not call me so," she replied with a blush which would have made the horizon at sunset blush with shame. "I am a messenger from the princess, come hither to get some information from you."

"What may that be?"

"You have travelled far and long, oh! pilgrim. Do you

know where king Vikrama is at present? We hear that he too like you has gone on a pilgrimage. It would be a loss to the kingdom if he renounces kingship for ever."

"I happen to know where the king is, but he is in danger of his life and I dare not disclose his whereabouts."

"My princess is in love with him and bids him come to the Swayamyara. Can you send a message?"

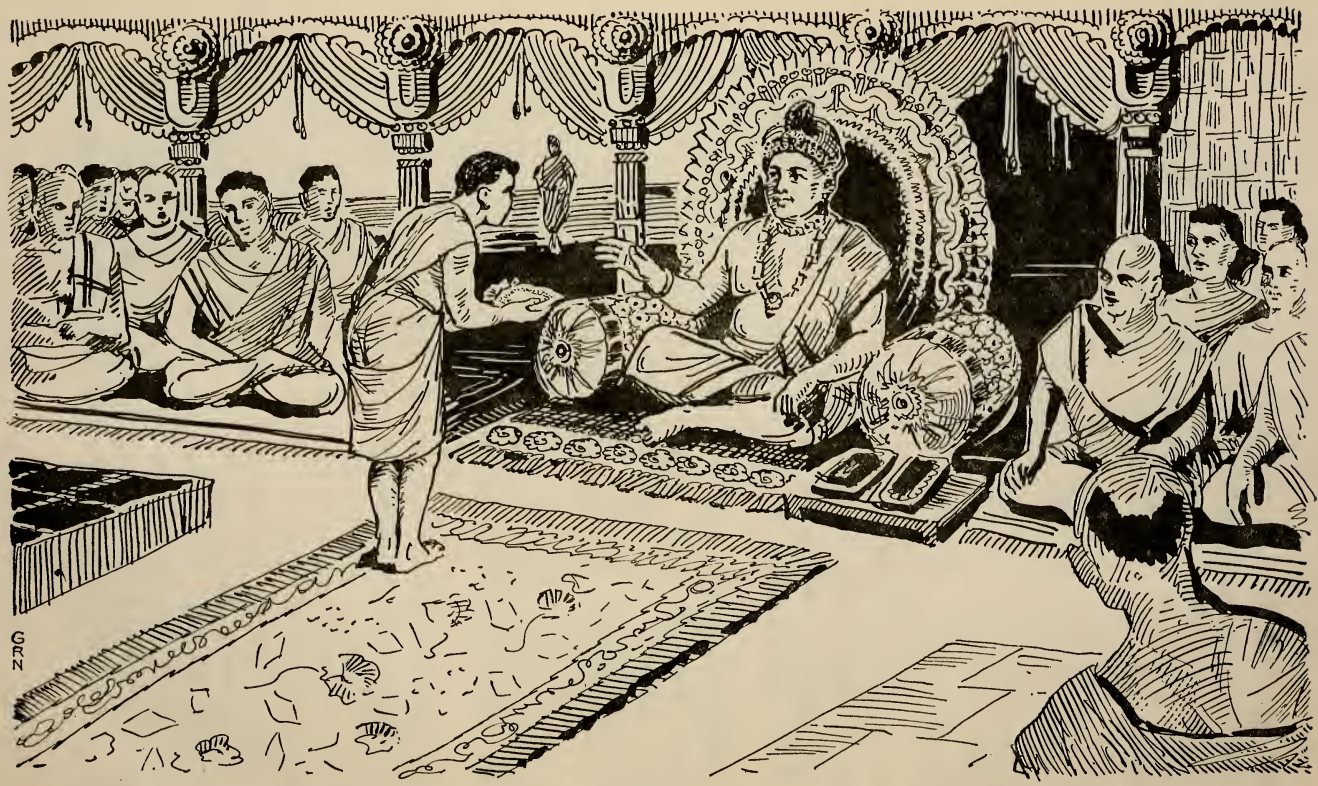
"Your princess has, you say, fallen in love with a person whom she has not yet seen? How like a woman! Their only law is their whim and their fancy. Why does she love a person who may not live the next ten days?"

"Why ask such a question? A devoted wife shares the troubles and joys of her husband in his world and in the next. Often she can change evil fortune to good; and even if she cannot, she can surely make the burden lighter by half," replied the messenger.

"Well, then, my lady, king Vikrama is now in Manipur. Deeply in love with the princess. Why even now as we two are talking here, he is talking to the princess. He will, if she wills it so, be her lord and protector, while she shall be his divinity in human form, as Shiva and Parvati are to one another."

The princess flashed a lightning smile which blinded the king and before he could recover his eye-sight, she had turned right about and fled.

On the wedding day, the pandal was resplendant with the colour of the head dresses, radiant with the precious stones worn by the princess, and reverberating with the strains of music. The princess came into that assembly of kings and princes, with a rose garland in her hands poised to be placed round the neck of her chosen hero. All eyes were focussed on her and every suitor put on the best and the broadest smile of his life. Each face brightened with hope as she approached and sank back into despair as she passed him by. King Vikrama was reminded of a similar scene witnessed by his court poet



THREE BAGS OF GOLD

Kalidasa, another of the nine gems in his palace. She was like a man with a torch passing down a dark street. The face of each house lit up as he approached and fell into darkness again when he passed it by. The assembly watched without breathing. They raised their eyebrows when she passed the last king and proceeded further. What was she up to now? They did not have to wait for long. She went straight to the stranger in the court and placed the garland round his gracious neck.

A hundred swords leaped from their sheaths at this choice, which they considered was an affront on the entire clan of kings. At the same time, as if from nowhere, sprang a hundred soldiers round the great king Vikramaditya. They were bodyguards brought and air dropped, as it were, by still another of the gems of his court, Vetal. All the kings, and most of all, the father of the princess, were mighty pleased when they learnt that the one and only one Vikramaditya was the chosen hero of the day. After the ceremonies were over, the royal couple returned to their own kingdom.

The home coming of Vikramaditya with Wanawallari was celebrated with an aplomb that equalled that of the return of Rama and Sita to Ayodhya after years of exile. Among the celebrations was a super magic show arranged for the pleasure of the King. Needless to say, the leader of the magic show was the necromancer whom we saw at the Smashan. The disciple was the enemy of the king and the assistant was Bhairab, the Frankenstein. The king saw through their disguise. But what could he do? Forty days were over. He had forgotten to mention this danger to the queen.

The performance started. A rope was thrown up in the air. Its top disappeared in the blue. Bhairab climbed up the rope and disappeared. A little while later, two legs, two arms, a body and finally a head, the dismembered parts of Bhairab, the walking ghost, fell down. The rope was coiled back. The magician's assistant re-

joined the limbs. The master breathed life into it. And then he whispered some command in its ear. It turned towards the king and stepped out. The king turned pale. The Queen uttered some manthras and put out the palm of her hand. Bhairab fell back dead, once again a corpse. The audience grapsed what was happening but did not know how to intervene. They were warriors, not magicians. The master and his assistant then closed in for the kill. The Queen pointed a finger. They were rooted to the ground. The guards completed the task. The three bodies were thrown into the river where crocodiles were in plenty. That was the end of their black magic and themselves.

Varahamihira explained the magical powers of the princess to the king. According to him, there is no ghost, devil or evil spirit that can stand against the spiritual power of an absolutely pure woman.

THREE BAGS OF GOLD

IT did not happen long ago, or even far far away. The year was 1881, a figure you can read anyway you like; left to right or right to left, upside down or even right side up. The place was the palace of the Maharajah of Cochin on the Kerala Coast. The day was the fourth day of the moon in the month of Bhadra; an all fools' day for the entire Kerala country. Befitting the occasion, the Maharajah had arranged a tournament of "Tall Tales" to be narrated by his assembly of courtiers, with the people at large filling the galleries as an audience. Three prizes were announced. One for the man who could narrate an imaginary experience in the most convincing manner; the second for the man who could convince the assembly that the dish he tasted was the most tasty one of the day; and lastly, the third for the person who could prove that he was the most lucky person in the whole assembly.

At eleven o'clock on the appointed day, the courtiers were in their seats. The clock began to strike and the Maharajah entered the hall simultaneously, very much like the good old Count of Monte Cristo. A stickler for punctuality, and a boss with a temper, woe unto the courtier who happened to arrive late. The king was a great scholar, something of a poet, a great wit, a connoisseur of music and Kathakali and consequently a most fascinating talker. So were they all, the courtiers around him, each glib tongued enough to talk the hind legs off a donkey. Today they were vying with each other to tell the tallest tale of their lives in the most convincing manner that the magic boxes of their heads could conjure up. Inside those craniums were seething tiger hunts, encounters with crocodiles, taming of wild elephants, giants whose heads grow beneath their shoulders,

thrilling adventures by sea and land, hair breadth escapes, conquests of goblins, shutting up of Jeenies in kerosene oil tins and so on and so on. The table was laden with sweets and savouries and hot dishes, each one a rare delicacy. Every courtier was choosing mentally the dish he was to prove as the most tasty of all, rolling in his mind well turned phrases to describe the qualities of the dish he had chosen.

The Maharajah placed three embroidered bags which contained, he announced, one hundred and one gold coins each. Mallisseri, the shrewd old courtier, respectfully requested that the bag be counted in the presence of the assembly. On any other day the king would have taken umbrage at the insinuation. But not today. Today was All Fools Day and he was in very high spirits. He opened out the bags, counted out the money and placed them back again with a smile that put every one in a happy mood. The audience clapped. The function had started right.

Unfortunately, like the smudge in the very face of the full moon, a courtier in the assembly itself changed the mood of the house and blackened the face of the king. "I beg your pardon, your Majesty," he said, "I did not see the contents. Could it be opened again?" he requested. This was too much. Yes, too much even on All Fools Day or Vinayaka Chaturthi, as they call the day in Kerala. "Never mind if you saw it or not. Others are here to bear witness to the contents of the bag," replied the king. And then to put the cheeky chap in his place, asked him: "I noticed that you came in late. Why were you late please? Will you condescend to explain?"

"Your Majesty," replied the man in a hurry, "I ate a little too well at breakfast and fell into a short nap. When I woke it was too late and so I ran all the way, as fast as a heavy paunch full of food, would allow a fat man of forty to run."

"A very lame excuse," said the king, getting more

annoyed. "Overate at breakfast! With all this food waiting for you here!" exclaimed the king.

The late-comer's tone was subdued. "My wife had prepared Pazda Prathaman (a *keer* made of banana)—your Majesty. I took more than I intended to take, when I sat at the meal."

The king appeared to be appeased, but a courtier poked up the dying embers of the king's anger. "Bananas and ripe ones' too, at this season of the year!" was his sarcastic comment.

The Maharaja's annoyance returned. "Yes," agreed the king, "how do you explain it?" he asked.

"I know your Majesty. But this banana tree was brought from the slopes of the Western Ghats and so it ripened out of turn. That was why my wife made a special occasion of it, your Majesty. I beg your pardon for being late." "My wife did that. My wife did this", repeated the Maharajah in a sneer. "Hardly an excuse for coming late."

The king was really angry this time; the truant equally anxious to get back into his majesty's favour. He gave out in one breath the entire lot of circumstances that had led to his delay.

The plant was sent by his daughter from her husband's house. His wife nurtured it like a daughter. The fruits were eighty-five, a very big bunch. His wife had let it ripen on the tree itself, protecting it by a net. This morning she cut it down with her own fair hands. The prathaman was made by the wife herself, from beginning to end. Hence the delay. "How could a mere husband refuse to take it when asked to do so," was his special pleading.

The king was indulgent. He too had a daughter newly married and living away from home. He could very well understand the feelings of a parent. Another courtier, however, fanned up the dying flame.

"Your Majesty," he said, "such a rare delicacy should

have been brought here to be shared by all of us."

"Quite so," agreed the king. "What say you to that, Kalloor?" he asked. Before Kalloor could explain, the other courtiers joined in the chorus, happy at Kalloor's discomfiture and anxious to add their mite to it.

"A rare dish, fit for a royal feast!" they said in triumph. The king looked angrily at Kalloor.

The latter was quiet and calm. He bent forward and took in his hand the first bag of gold.

"What is that?" demanded the king, beside himself with rage at the affront.

"I have narrated an absolutely imaginary experience, your Majesty," replied Kalloor. "And, from what I can see, I find that I have done it most convincingly too."

The assembly looked as if every one had bitten a piece of lemon each. The cloud on the king's eyebrows cleared up. He smiled to see that Kalloor had won. For Kalloor the youngest of all, was the favourite of the king, an object of jealousy to all the rest. The audience expressed their approval with a long thunderous clap and waived their kerchiefs in the air.

Before the noise and the clamour had completely quietened, Kalloor leaned forward once again and appropriated the second bag.

"What is that?" the king snapped out completely taken aback.

Kalloor was quiet and calm. "May it please your Majesty, I have just convinced all the assembly that I had tasted the most delicious dish of all," was his explanation.

The king was doubly pleased. The assembly could not object. They had all expressed in a chorus that it was a dish fit for kings; had they not? The applause of the audience was longer and louder, if that was possible. For it Kalloor was the favourite of the king, he was the darling of the people.

Before the noise and the clamour had abated, Kalloor leaned forward a third time and took in hand the third

and the last bag.

"The man who won two prizes had proved," he explained, "that he was the luckiest man of the lot."

BANROO AND TAPAI

(A good old ghost story)

BANROO and Tapai were two ghosts—uncle and nephew. Banroo was the uncle and Tapai, therefore, the nephew. A full grown ghost, with horns shaped like the new moon, Banroo both terrified and protected his nephew Tapai, who looked like an overgrown boy. He had not yet grown his horns. On a cold and rainy night in the middle of winter, Tapai felt frightened and lonely because Banroo was not there to shield him from dangers. He had gone for one of his travels in Africa to meet his brother ghosts in other countries. So Tapai sought out eleven other friends in distress, whose guardians also had gone to Africa, with Banroo as their leader.

At twelve o'clock at night, the twelve youthful ghosts gathered by the side of the river Padma in a wide open space. On the east lay the river, on the west a marshy land; on the north was a forest and on the south a jungle of brambles. Feeling awfully cold in the wintry rain and frightened by the howling wind on the lonely plain, they lit up a fire and sat around it for warmth, light and protection.

Just at that time, a middle aged man called Sunil happened to come that way. His presence at this lonely place in the middle of the night, in spite of the heavy rain, requires to be explained. He was a very poor man who rarely got two meals a day. He and his wife had no blankets to keep them warm in winter. In fact they did not even have a change of clothes. She had a saree and he a dhoti; that was all. Hungry, tired and shivering, the wife lost her temper and told her husband to get out, get a piece of rope and hang himself on the nearest tree. Sunil walked out, banging the door behind him. His wife, Chitra, watched him go out in the dark, cold, rainy

night, with tears in her eyes. As soon as he disappeared round a turning, she wanted to call him back. It was too late. He could not hear her, and she dared not step out into the darkness.

"Ah !" she said, "he will come back when his temper has coled down. Hasn't he done so, after many a quarrel like this? I'll wait"—so saying, she closed the window and lay down on the mat. Weak as she was, she soon fell fast asleep.

Sunil dragged his feet along, as if he were walking in a dream. Very soon he found himself in the jungle, too weak to walk any more. Home was too far for him to go back by the time he thought of returning. What was he to do? Where was he to go in this torrential rain? At that moment, he saw through the pitch darkness a glimmer of light and walked towards it. The glimmer became a flare, and presently turned out to be a pillar of light. I shall go and warm myself by that fire, he said to himself and walked faster. In that frame of mind he was not even surprised at seeing a fire burning brightly in spite of the heavy downpour. Nor did he think it strange to see twelve persons in that god-forsaken place sitting around the fire in a circle, being warmed by the fire and drenched by the rain, at one and the same time.

He walked up to them, gave a gentle push to the man on his right saying "Move up brother, let me warm myself." The man happened to be the ghost Tapai. The colloquial Bangalee for the request "let me warm myself" used by him was also a single word: Tapai, so that when Sunil said "Sar-re-bhai-Tapai," the young ghosts one and all wondered how this human being knew the nephew of Banroo so familiarly as to address him as Brother Tapai. They started whispering among themselves at this strange event, planning what to do. Being young and inexperienced ghosts, they had not yet learned how to frighten human beings, specially those who called them by their name and addressed them as brother. Sunil's

attention was aroused. His tiredness having abated a little, he looked around, and what he saw froze his blood, sent a shiver down his spine and made his eyes come out quite a bit.

Everyone of the twelve persons had their feet turned backwards. Now, in Bengal and several others parts of India too, ghosts have their feet pointing backwards. As soon as he knew he was in the midst of twelve ghosts on a cold, rainy night far away from human beings, every hair on his body stood erect. All his mind, body, brain and soul worked furiously to save his life. The ghosts had in the meanwhile decided what to do and asked Sunil:

"How do you know his name is Tapai?"

Sunil's brain worked like a flash of lightning showing clearly how the land lay, for him to escape. "Don't I know him?" he replied. "He owes me three hundred rupees. Give it to me at once, Tapai, or I'll remove your bones and make cutlets out of you."

Tapai taken aback by this sudden turn of events somehow managed to stammer that he never had borrowed any money. "When did I borrow the money?" he repeated warming to the subject. Sunil's wit rose to the occasion. He pretended to look more closely at Tapai. "Of course it was not you who borrowed the money, but your father. By my ancestors! You look as much like him as a lamb looks like his parent. But no matter. Father's debts are to be paid by the sons or I'll tie you up to the nearest mango tree."

Now Sunil was a brahmin as they clearly saw by his sacred thread. His lean and hungry look convinced them that he must be a devotee of some magic, a person who perhaps knew how to tie up a ghost to a tree. The entire lot of them trembled at the prospect. The more they trembled, the bolder Sunil became. The ghosts consulted among themselves and decided to take out three hundred rupees from the treasure hidden by Tapai's uncle

BANROO THE GHOST

Banroo, in the hollow of an old banian tree in the forest close by. Tapai was too frightened to agree. Banroo was the most terrible ghost in the whole district. His anger was great; his vengeance swift; and his strength enormous. On the other hand, there was the immediate danger of all the twelve being tied up to a tree, never to escape. Already Sunil had changed his squatting posture into a cross-legged one, a most likely preparation for his magical chantings. They promised to pacify Banroo somehow or other, and very soon made Tapai agree to pay the money. Two of them ran up to the tree, dug out the money and counted it out to Sunil, who had all the while held on to Tapai by his tikki, or tuft of hair on the back of his head.

Even after receiving the money, Sunil would not let him go. "You must come with me," he said, "up to my house." "For," thought Sunil, "who knows what mischief these ghosts would do once my back is turned?" All the while he was mumbling, what they thought were manthras, in an undertone. Young ghosts are very superstitious and afraid of anything that looks or sounds like magic. They let Tapai go with Sunil, sending two more to keep up his oozing courage. All the four thus retraced the way the man had come and soon reached the village.

At the village, Sunil had another idea. It was, he thought, unwise to show these ghosts where he lived. They might come back and try to get back the money or punish him in some other way. You can dupe some people sometimes, but not every time. He, therefore, got inside the gate of a pretty rich person, who had a garden, a cow shed with cows, a tank full of fish and a large house with strong doors and then released Tapai. They flew like the young ghosts they were and disappeared.

After waiting long enough to assure himself that they had really gone, Sunil went home, knocked loudly at the door, entered the house a proud man, closed the door

behind him, threw the money on the mat, and gave a resounding slap on wife's left shoulder. "There you are," said he. "There are three hundred rupees in that bag. Don't say anymore that I am a useless man." His wife, Chitra, was at first frightened that her husband might have stolen the money. When, however, he told her the tale, they both laughed. The strong wind outside suddenly opened the door and the lightning flashed in—Chitra fell flat on the coins. Sunil rose up and bolted the door, a thing they both had forgotten to do in their flush of excitement.

Banroo returned unexpectedly early. He was furious when he heard the story of Sunil and the loss of three hundred rupees. He burst out laughing, which is what ghosts do when they are about to teach human beings a lesson. The whole place shook with the sound of the laughter. Some said it is the hyena, but others thought they knew better and said to themselves it is a ghost out on some mischief. His war-cry over, Banroo asked to be shown the man's house, which Tapai did with the utmost willingness. Of course, the house he pointed out was that of the rich brahmin and not the hovel where Sunil lived. Banroo walked in through the wall and materialised behind a huge jackfruit tree. There he stood hiding himself, but letting anyone who came out on the verandah, see his horns. Once more he laughed. The sound of the laughter and the sight of the horns were enough to frighten anyone. At least, so Banroo thought.

He did not bargain for the presence of a brave young son of the house lately returned from the town, who took the laughter to be that of a hyena and not that of a ghost and came out with a staff to drive it away, lest it frighten the cows and calves in the cowshed. Rakhal, for that was the brave lad's name, saw the horns of the ghost. Anyone else would have connected the laughter and the horns and convinced himself that here was a ghost who had materialised to do some harm. Not so Rakhal.

They had a huge cow with horns curved like the new moon, who stood as high as a man from the tip of the horn to the tip of its hoof. The cow had been missing that day. A search party sent to find her out had not yet returned. The name of the cow was Banree, but its daknam (pet name) was Banroo, exactly the same as that of the ghost.

As soon as he saw the horns, Rakhal called out: "You, rascal, Banroo. I have caught you this time. I shall teach you a nice lesson." So saying he lifted the stick and advanced towards the jackfruit tree. Banroo, the ghost at once made himself invisible and flew with a howl. People thought it must be a ghost. Rakhal was sure it was a jackal whose ears he perhaps mistook for horns in the dark shade under the tree. At the same time the search party came back with Banroo, the cow, and every one forgot the laughter, the horns and the howl, in the joy of having got back the lost cow.

Banroo went back to the plain by the side of the river Padma. "This is no safe place any more for us poor ghosts," said he and gathering all his followers they went up towards the foot hills of the Himalayas where men were scarce and the tropical forests the right place for ghosts to roam at their sweet will and pleasure.

THE LOST CAMEL

(A very old detective story)

KING Veerasena of Bijapur was well known for the very wise and humane manner in which he reigned over his people. Naturally kind-hearted, as he was, it was really the wisdom of his four ministers that helped him to carry out his plans for the benefit of the country and his subjects. He had, however, one defect. He was too self-willed. Many a time his ministers had to give in to his wishes when their own wisdom had dictated some other course of action as the better one to follow. Once the king decided to levy a heavy tax upon the people, rich and poor alike, to raise money for building a luxurious palace. This time, the ministers told him plainly that this would be an unjust imposition on the country. They knew the king would be greatly annoyed and that by speaking frankly against the royal will, they might lose their position in the palace. Nevertheless, they felt that this was too important a matter to yield to the whims of the King. As they had expected, the king was very angry when he saw that they had objected to his pet plan of building a luxurious palace. He not only dismissed them from their posts, but also sent them into exile.

The four ministers, dressed as wayfarers, left the capital city by its western gate and walked out without any idea as to where they were going. Walking along aimlessly the reached, in the afternoon, a big banian tree where four footpaths met. They sat under its shade to rest themselves before proceeding further. Idly talking of one thing and another, they noticed that it had rained in those parts, the night before, and also that since the rain, a solitary camel had passed that lonely way. The four highly intelligent persons thought they would pass the time by trying to describe the camel by examining its

THE LOST CAMEL

footprints in the wet ground.

While they were engaged in this manner, a camel driver came running up to them crying aloud that he had lost his camel and asking them whether they had, by any chance, seen the animal pass that way.

The first minister thereupon, asked the man: "Was your camel lame in the left hind leg?"

"Yes, my Master, so he was. Did you see him?"

The second minister was the next to ask: "It was not only lame, but it had no tail either. Was that not so?"

"Yes, yes, my Masters. It had lost its tail a year ago. Surely you have seen the animal. Won't you please tell me where it is?"

"We have not seen the camel," said the third minister, "but it looks as if it was blind in one eye."

"Exactly so, my camel had only one eye. Ah! I see you have seen it, but will not tell me where it is. Probably you are the persons who stole my camel."

The fourth minister now took up the thread: "We tell you honestly we have not even seen your camel, let alone the question of stealing it. However, I could tell you one more point—It was not keeping good health."

"By the souls of my forefathers!", said the camel driver. "I am certain now that you four are camel thieves. Give me back my camel, I tell you. Or else, I shall make a complaint to the king."

The first minister replied: "I tell you, once more, we have not seen your camel. If you wish to bring this matter before the king, you may do so but that will not help you to get your camel back. You had better search elsewhere without wasting your time, making false complaints against honest people."

"Honest people, indeed!" exclaimed the driver. "I know people like you who dress like well-to-do men, but are, for all your dress, the biggest rogues that ever stole a camel."

He ran to the king's palace, shouting all the way half in anger, half in sorrow: "Justice, I shall have justice."

He did not have to run very far, for the king with a couple of bodyguards was coming that way for an evening ride. Seeing a subject in distress, Veerasena stopped and enquired what was it that made him shout for justice in such great distress. The camel driver was over-excited by his own worry at having lost his camel, and the impertinence of those four who, he was sure, were camel thieves.

"Your Majesty!" he said, falling on his knees. "I am a poor camel driver. If I loose my camel I shall starve to death. Your Majesty alone can help this poor wretch. I shall be always grateful, your Majesty. . . ."

"Stop babbling, my man," commanded the king. "Be calm and tell me what has happened."

The man then narrated the story and ended by saying: "I beseech you, your Majesty. Please let justice be done. Let the thieves be punished."

"That can be done without much difficulty. Be at ease and show me the four thieves. I shall leave one of my bodyguards here and you shall take his horse. Ride ahead and show me where the camel thieves are."

The camel driver mounted the horse and led the king to the foot of the banian tree, where the four ministers were sitting cool and collected as if nothing had happened.

Veerasena was surprised to find that the men accused of stealing a camel were his exiled ministers. They would never do such a thing. Without any enquiry whatsoever, he could have passed such a judgment. But he preferred not to do so, for he knew very well that it is not enough that justice is done. It should be done in such a manner that the subjects are able to clearly see that justice is being done. He started to question the ministers on the crime of theft levelled against them by the camel driver.

"We have not even seen the camel, let alone stealing it," was the answer.

This was indeed more surprising than the complaint

made against them.

"How then did you know that it was lame?" asked Veerasena.

The first minister replied: "That is elementary, Sire. One has only to look at the footprints left by the animal on the wet ground. Your Majesty will notice that it is unable to place the left hind foot firmly on the ground."

The king, the bodyguard and the man looked at the footprints and satisfied themselves that what the minister said was true.

"I agree about that, but how did you find out that the camel had no tail? Do the footprints tell you that also?"

"No sire," replied the second minister, "it is not the footprints but the bodies of the gnats lying on the ground that enabled us to presume that the camel had no tail."

The king and everybody else looked and saw several gnats lying on the ground, so full of blood that they could not even move. If the camel had had a tail, it would have whisked them off before they could drink its blood to that extent. This point also having been conceded, King Veerasena came to the third point.

"How did you find that it had lost an eye, is the question." said he.

The third minister explained this by saying: "Sire, we know not only that it is blind in one eye, but we also know that it is the left eye that is blind."

The King's surprise increased. His lifted eyebrows clearly raised the question: "And how is that?"

The Minister continued: "If one looks carefully your Majesty, one can see that although there is more grass to eat on the left side, the camel has eaten the grass on the right side only. Its left eye must have been blind; there is no doubt about it."

King Veerasena and the camel driver too were convinced on this point also, and when the fourth minister explained that the camel's dung showed that it was ill, there was nothing more left to prove the innocence of the

ministers.

The king told them: "My eyes have been opened to your wisdom. You have wide open eyes which see things that others do not notice and you have alert minds that draw lessons from every small thing you notice. Your advice not to tax my people too much, I respect. Will you please accept my offer to you to return and be again my counsellors in the palace?"

The gracious offer was accepted and they became ministers then and there. The camel driver was given another camel that was not ill, that was not lame, that had a complete tail, and whose both eyes were intact.

CHANCHALA

(The Story of a Strange Bride)

IN the North West part of India, there lived, in the grand days of old, a just and noble king who had seven sons. Like their father, the king, the princes too were just and noble, wise and truthful. The youngest who was the handsomest of the lot, was called Atirupa, which means excessively beautiful. He was a bit of a dreamer and a serious boy even from his tender years. The king was puzzled by the boy's serious ways. Nevertheless he took great pains to treat the seven sons exactly alike. They were dressed alike, equipped alike, educated alike and when seven palaces were built for them, they were identical in every detail, even to the number of cooking vessels in each palace. Only in one thing was the King unable to hold the scales even among them. Search as much as he would, he could not find seven brides exactly alike for his sons. When all efforts failed, his counsellors advised him by saying: "Sire, where Tadbir or human effort fails, one can only fall back on Taqdir or luck and leave the rest to the gods."

The king agreed. If that be so, he said, the choice shall be left entirely to chance. There should be no half-way measures in the matter. He, therefore, told his sons to go up to the top of the tower, which overlooked the whole Capital and send one arrow each in any direction one chose. Each prince should marry the girl in the house where his arrow fell. The princes abided by their father's decision and sent seven arrows in the seven directions. Six of them fell on or near the house of respectable citizens. Some were rich and some were poor, but all of them were respectable personages. And what was more, every one of them had a charming young daughter to be married. Atirupa's arrow, was found stuck in the trunk of a tree,

on one of whose branches was a female monkey. There was no house in the compound.

The pleasure that everybody felt at the success of the six princes was spoilt by the bad luck which befell Atirupa. "Try once more, my son," said the king, "you might have better luck next time." "No father," said the prince, "I will not go back upon my word. I shall remain unmarried, for that appears to be my fate. As for the monkey, I shall rear it up as a beloved pet."

The king and his ministers could not advise the prince to act against his word. Those were days when a man's word was law, and written agreements were not even heard of.

The marriage of the six princes was conducted with great pomp and show. Hundreds were fed. The whole city was decorated and lighted up as if it were Dewali night. People in their gayest clothes thronged the streets. Everybody was happy, except the youngest prince, who kept away from the festivals, determined to stick by his vow, but all the same sad at the trick which fate appeared to have played on him.

The monkey remained in the prince's palace, in a state of luxury, which no pet animal has ever enjoyed, either before or after. Its collar was made of gold, studded with diamonds and rubies. It had a velvet lining. Its bed was of the softest and strongest material. Its food was the best. The prince fed her himself and spent much time playing with her. He even started talking to the monkey. At first, he merely coaxed her to eat or asked simple questions addressed more to himself than to the pet. "Eat my pet" and so on he used to say. Gradually, he got into the habit of talking to the monkey as if it were a human being, telling her, "Do you know what I did today?". . . "I am sorry I am late; you see, there was a big hunting party...." "Do not pull at your chain, like that; I'll make you a bigger one." Later still, he would even speak to her about his worries and troubles, somehow believing that though she

could not reply, she understood very well all that he said to her. He had named her Chanchala, which means one who is always on the move, as monkeys always are. Very soon, however, he began to wonder whether he was right in calling her so, because for a monkey, Chanchala was too quiet and thoughtful. However, he did not change the name.

The King could not get over the sadness which he felt whenever he saw how his youngest son did not join in any celebrations or parties. In fact, Atirupa's increased fondness for the company of his pet quite puzzled him. People explained it in different ways. Some said he was noble to keep his word. Others said he was being obstinate. Still others thought he was trying to win greater favours from the King, by living a sad life. Atirupa was not moved by either praise or blame. "Chanchala," said he, "let people say what they like. People who like me praise my action, those who do not like me, blame me. That is all. I shall continue to do what I think is right. For me, a man's word is loftier than the mountains, not even the soaring eagle can fly over it."

In this manner twelve months passed by. The six princes were happy, but worried at the amount of kindness which their father showered on Atipura. In fact, their feelings towards him were mixed. They loved him as a brother, felt sorry for his bad luck, and at the same time grew a little jealous of their father's increasing fondness for him. They planned to show Atirupa what a mistake he had made. "Let us hope we can make him realise," they said, "what he is missing by remaining unmarried."

THE FEAST

They agreed to invite their father, the king, to accept their hospitality, by coming and staying with them for a day in turn. "A wife," said the eldest, "is a Saha-dharmini, one who shares all our duties. Even in daily duties such as

entertaining guests, a wife is, according to Shastras, half the man. Atirupa will be welcoming our father, without his better half by his side. It will show how the absence of a wife will make all his social duties only half done." Thinking thus, they invited their father to their houses on six different days. The King went with the greatest delight. The eldest son's house was decorated like a bride's house on the wedding day, with garlands on door lintels, palm leaves at the gates, bright silver lamps with perfumed oil, in which the best cotton wicks were burning bright. Music resounded throughout the palace and dances were held in the main reception hall. One hundred and one dishes of fruits, specially prepared vegetables, seventeen kinds of sweets, rose water with milk and almond paste, spiced with cardamoms, prepared in icy cool water from mountain springs, provided the fare, all served in plates, dishes and goblets of purest gold. Over and above all this luxury and plenty was the respectful, loving care with which the princess looked after the comforts of her father-in-law. The king who had gone with the greatest delight, returned overflowing with pleasure and kindness. At the time of his departure, when the daughter-in-law made pranams (obeisance) by touching his feet, he bid her rise, and presented her with a Nav-lakha-har, a necklace of gold and precious stones worth nine lakhs of rupees.

The next day was spent at the second son's palace, who received his father with the same lavishness, grandeur, respect and love, providing at the same time an entirely different set of entertainments and completely different set of 101 courses for the feast. His reception pleased the king immensely, who gave the second daughter-in-law, who was the moving spirit behind it all, another Nav-lakha-har. In this way, six glorious days passed and the King thought to himself: If only Atirupa also had a spouse, my happiness would have been complete. But that is not to be. Fortune never comes with both hands full.

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At that moment, while the King, deep in thought, was walking slowly up and down the terrace of his palace, Atirupa was announced. He came in and invited the King to his palace. And, as if that surprise was not enough, he invited all the ministers, the captain of the palace guards and the entire king's household to accept his hospitality for three whole days. The king carefully hid his surprise and gracefully accepted the invitation and sent his son, happy on his way. After he left he just said: "How strange!" Had he known what had happened, the king would not have said, how strange: but exclaimed instead: "How mysterious!" For mysterious indeed were the events that gave Atirupa the courage to invite such a big company for three whole days.

CHANCHALA SPEAKS

When the elder brothers were entertaining the King one by one at their palaces, Atirupa fell deeper and deeper into despair over his fate. On the fifth night, he poured out his soul to his dumb companion, not because he expected Chanchala to help him out, but because, talking of one's troubles lightens the burden in the heart.

"Chanchala, my faithful and dumb companion, how sad is our fate! My brothers, the princes and my father's courtiers, nay, the whole city, is waiting to see how I shall play the part of a host, without a wife. This is only the beginning. The world which says I am self-willed will now find out different ways to put me to shame. What shall I do? I know you are also sad in my sadness, how I wish you could talk!" So saying, he sat on a pedestal, with his elbows on his knees and his face deep in the palms of his hand, morose, silent and absent minded, like one crying without tears or like one who had swallowed something bitter of which he would not speak. Chanchala spoke:

"Do not grieve, my lord. Invite them all: the king,

his ministers, the palace guard and the whole royal household. Invite them for three days. Everything will be all right."

Atirupa was stunned. Was he dreaming? No he was not dreaming, for Chanchala continued: "Go now, my lord, the king is alone. Go and invite everyone as I say."

Without fully realizing what he was doing, Atirupa hurried to the palace, met his father and invited him as we have just seen. As soon as he had done it, he lost his faith, and doubted the wisdom of his hasty action. All the way back, he said to himself: "It may not have been a dream, but could it not be an illusion? What if the whole plan failed? It is a miracle that the monkey spoke. But can this wonder be sustained? No. It will succeed. It has to succeed. Fate has not been kind to me, but I have done nothing to deserve mockery too at her hands."

In this state of mind, he came straight to Chanchala and told her: "I have invited everybody. Now, what next?"

Chanchala looked knowingly, but was dumb. She did not utter a word. Atipura went pale. His doubts returned. "I am ruined," he said. "Oh! Why was I in such a hurry? Why did I not make sure of the arrangements before taking this step? What shall I do? Speak, Chanchala, speak. If it was really you who spoke, surely you can speak again." But Chanchala continued to be silent. Atirupa shook her violently as if to shake some words out of her, when a copper plate she was holding in her hand fell to the ground. Picking it up, Atirupa looked at the monkey, which pointed a finger at the plate as if it wanted to say: please look at it.

Atirupa looked. He saw some writing on the plate and read it:

"Do not regret. I cannot speak any more today. Go to the tree where you saw me. Drop this message in the hollow thereof. Wait for an answer."

Atirupa took up the plate and hastened out to the place where the tree stood. It was a big banian tree, three hundred years old. A man had to take three hundred steps to go round it once. With its four hundred and fifty aerial roots each one of which looked like a tree, this venerable grandfather, was almost a forest in himself; a whole forest in a single tree! On the Western side of the trunk, at a man's height was a big hollow, one cubit wide. Atirupa dropped the copper plate into it and waited.

For some time nothing happened. His doubts arose again. "What am I doing? Perhaps nothing will happen. I shall be out...." but he could not finish his sentence for the astonishing beauty who stood before him, struck him dumbfounded. She was dressed in a sea-green saree of the finest China silk, and the wind playing upon it created pretty little waves on her body, all the way up. Her figure was so light that she seemed to quiver in the strong wind as she stood there balancing rather than standing on her pretty little feet. She spoke in a sweet low tone:

"Come with me, the queen is waiting for you."

QUEEN OF THE PERIS

Atirupa did not need a second command. He followed her into the hollow of the tree. It was quite dark inside. He shut his eyes to accustom them to the darkness and then opened them again. He could see better now. Passing through a dark tunnel which twisted and turned and appeared to be never ending, they reached a flight of steps. A glow of light came from the opening at the top. When they reached the top Atirupa had to close his eyes once again. This time it was the brightness that blinded him. They had reached a quadrangle. On three sides were a hundred arches of white marble, on pillars of shining black stone. The lawn was of the

most beautiful green grass, criss-crossed by marble passages. The crimson and gold, the deep blue and violet, mixed with milk white of the flowers, took his breath away. The jasmine, champa and other fragrant flowers gave out an intoxicating cocktail of odours wafted by the cool breeze playfully creating wavelets in the flowing waters of the canal in the centre. Its cooling effect on the sweating brow of Atirupa prevented him from fainting at the beauty, the grandeur and the fragrance of the place. Far out he saw, what appeared to him the durbar hall of a queen, heavily curtained with velvet and silk cloth, gorgeously embroidered with patterns of flowers, leaves, delightful curves which looked like vines and yet were not vines. The central part was gathered at two ends and fell like multi-coloured waterfalls; between these he saw the queen sitting on her throne of gold and red velvet. Two maids of supreme beauty were fanning her with huge ostrich fans, while half a dozen more stood around like body guards. There was not a man in sight. The queen looked as if she was the combination of the goddesses of love and good fortune—Rati and Lakshmi as they are known in the sacred books. She was clothed in one long robe of red silk with many glancing colours, that shone green, violet or yellow at each movement caused by the breeze of the fans. The saree passing over her head was clinging like a cloud coloured by the sunset and settled lovingly in soft folds around her face.

Atirupa who was surprised when Chanchala spoke, who was puzzled and a little frightened when he passed through the dark passage, now stood there, completely confounded, like one who had forgotten where or who he was; like a person prepared to accept the most wonderful things, as if they were bound to happen in such conditions and in such a place. The queen spoke in a clear, musical liquid tone:

"I know that you have been sent by Chanchala. Now that you have seen the magic of this place, you will

believe what I say. Do not worry. Everything will be done to give your father a royal welcome. Go back and take rest, have a good sleep and you will be rejoiced at the arrangements, we peris (fairies) have made for you."

No sooner had she finished speaking than Atirupa saw himself back at the foot of the banian tree, looking at the hollow as if his life bond was inside. He now understood that Chanchala was also a peri like the others. She had come to him in her present form, for some purpose he did not know. Nor did he want to enquire why. Let the future unfold itself, was his mood at that time.

THE MAGIC FEAST

The king got up unusually early the next morning, dressed himself with unusual care, and came to his durbar hall in an unusually thoughtful mood. When he saw his courtiers, his eyebrows lifted up into an arch of surprise. There was an unusually perplexed look on their faces. They bowed low before the king and then without exchanging a word they set out of the palace in due order of precedence.

What words can describe their surprise at the sight which awaited them outside! The whole road from the king's palace to that of the prince was canopied with ornamental cloth of red, covered by yellow embroidery. Every pillar was of finished teak decorated by tender palm leaves. Arches made of the most beautiful and sweet scented flowers had been erected all along the path, under each of which stood a pair of guards, dressed in bright red uniform, with gold laces and swords with ornamental hilts, held up in respectful salute. A company of musicians appeared from nowhere to escort the distinguished company. The arrival at the prince's palace was announced by deafening crackers. showering of flowers, sprinkling of rose water and by the sweetest of music.

The prince, accompanied by half-a-dozen of his retinue came out and received the king and all the company and led them into a courtyard which was furnished and decorated with a rare combination of richness and good taste that had to be seen to be believed. These surprises, each one greater than the other, had prepared the king for the greatest surprise of all, the presence of an enchanting princess to receive the guests and play the part of the hostess. Even so, what they actually saw rooted them to the earth, so that for a minute or so, the whole assembly looked more like a picture on a wall than an assemblage of live persons, who can move and breathe.

On the left of Atirupa, the place ruled by custom for the wife, stood a girl rising seventeen or eighteen, who resembled an image of beaten gold in the red glow of the lamps. Her saree was green, mixed so cunningly with orange that it looked like a tender plaintain leaf held against a flame. It fell into folds that shifted about as she walked with an undulating motion, so enchanting that one wished to recede in order to see her continue to walk. Verily, Chanchala was beauty in motion, a walking beauty. She lifted her palms in namaste, and they resembled a lotus bud, swaying slightly on the tender stalk of her hand. The bewitching smile on her face was a greater welcome to the guests than any amount of words could have been. Her face was oval and sharply outlined, an outline that was still covered over beautifully by ever so slight an amount of fat. Tall, slim and upright, she looked yet as pliable as a strand of a palm leaf held in the hand. Gazing upon this perfection of a female form at the age when it passes from a delicate girl into a lovely woman, the king accepted her as his daughter-in-law, with a wholeheartedness, that had no place for any doubts or questions.

Her hospitality was as gracious as her beauty. There were a few foreign touches in it, which made it more

attractive to the king; while it helped the Vazier to understand that she was a peri from a far off land beyond the Himalaya mountain ranges.

The three days passed off like three pleasant dreamy hours. The king and his party returned happy in the happiness of Atirupa who continued to live with his new found jewel of a wife. He then invited all his brothers and their wives, to introduce her to them and them to her. They came and there was a most delightful family reunion.

THE SEARCH

Atirupa's luck made his brothers jealous of him. When the party he gave them was over, the eldest brother took him aside and told him:

"Atirupa, take care that you do not lose your wife. She is after all a peri. She may change back into her former body and disappear."

"That cannot be," said Atirupa, and trusting his brother, he added: "I have locked up her monkey-skin safely in a box."

"What box is safe against a peri? The best thing to do is to burn it up. Only then can you feel safe," advised the brother.

Atirupa believed his brother. He set fire to the skin. At once he heard Chanchala scream in her room: "I burn, I burn, I am being burnt alive." Atirupa at once poured water on the skin, which had only been singed by that time. Running out, he rushed into his wife's room. She had already gone: Where? He did not know. He could see only a faint bright haze receding.

Atirupa rushed out of the palace like a mad man, shouting: "Chanchala, Oh! my dear! please come back, please come back." People in the streets, the guards of the palace, the brothers six, all tried in vain to stop him. He was rushing like a wild boar. Right out of the gates

of the town he went, until very soon he was in a desert. Walking north and then east, he went on and on until he grew weary and tired. The sun was like a blazing fire. The white hot sand blistered his feet. The hot air created mirages of oases in the desert, which tempted him to go on for days and months, sleeping only when he fell down exhausted. One day he fell down almost in a faint and slept through the whole night. Early next morning, he heard some wailing and mourning which woke him up. He saw a man in rags, with a six months' growth of beard and hair, walking as if in a dream crying to himself: "Come back, come back. I shall die, if I do not see you again."

Seeing a fellow sufferer, Atirupa felt sympathy for him. "What can ail you my friend?" he asked; the man in rags replied: "I saw a fairy princess pass this way, crying out: 'I burn, I burn, I am being roasted alive.' Having seen her once, I am dying to see her again."

The prince surmised that this must be Chanchala. He told the haggard stranger the whole story and added: "I am wandering in search of her. I shall not stop until I find her or die in the attempt."

The stranger blessed him and said: "Go! my comrade in distress, and may the gods help you to find her. Here, take this iron rod. It has magical properties. You have only to give orders to it and the rod will beat up all your enemies."

"Thank you, my friend in need. Which way did she go? Could you tell me that?"

"She went due east," replied the stranger.

Atirupa went the way as he was directed. Presently he saw the desert gradually disappear. Shrubs and plants appeared on the horizon. The vegetation grew thicker, the land greener, until at last on the banks of a river, he stopped to allay his thirst, as well as to decide how he was to cross it. There he saw a youth, sad and woe begone, playing enchantingly on a veena. The music was

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so sweet that the birds stopped singing, the cows lifted their heads dropping the grass half chewed from their mouths. Now and then the youth stopped playing and sighed: "Come back, come back. I shall die if I do not see you again."

Atirupa's curiosity was naturally aroused. He asked the youth: "Who is it you long so much to see again, my young man?"

"I saw," said the youth, "a fairy princess pass this way, crying out: 'I burn, I burn, I am being roasted alive.' The gandharva music of her voice has haunted me ever since that moment."

Atirupa knew that this must have been Chanchala. He told the youth the whole story and added: "I am the unlucky person who was the cause of the sad event. I shall not stop until I find her or die in the attempt."

The youth was grateful for this piece of information. "Go, brother go, and the gods go with you. Take this veena. It can produce music that soothes like magic," he said.

"Which way did she go?" asked the prince.

"She went due north" replied the youth, and Atirupa turned his steps northwards.

There he came across forests and hills. There were hundreds and hundreds of hills each higher than the other; until at last he came across the highest mountains in the world, the Himalayas, or the abode of snow. The highest peaks were so high that the setting sun cast their shadows upon the sky. This holy mountain range, the land beloved of sages and saints, the home of miraculous healing plants, the regions of high altitudes where the air is clear and cold, soothed Atirupa's nerves. There, amidst a forest of peaks, he saw a hermitage all covered with snow. Going up to its door, he stood there unwilling to defile the sacred place by his unworthy presence. A sonorous deep voice welcomed him:

"Come inside, my son. I know what you are after."

Atirupa entered, made respectful obeisance to the yogi, lying down straight as a yard stick, eight points of his body—the toes, the knees, the waist, the shoulders and the forehead touching the ground. (This is known as Sashtanga Namaskar). The Yogi blessed Atirupa and then bidding him get up, gave him directions:

"Go beyond the Himalayas. In Tibet, you will meet a super-magician, at the source of the holy Ganges. He will give you a pair of magic sandals, that will take you to the abode of your beloved, which is in the Koh-Kos (Caucasus) mountain."

The prince started at once. He required no more resting. The grand news and the hope it gave him, had renewed his waning strength in a trice. Climbing perpendicular hill sides, walking along very narrow ridges, with a drop of several thousand feet on either side, suffering extreme cold that gave a pain inside his bones, frost-bitten and tired almost to the point of death, he reached the place of the magician who cured him with his balms, gave him food and rest. After listening to his story, he gave him a pair of magic sandals which took him to the kingdom of the peris.

There, he went about playing on his veena. The music was so sweet and soothing that quite a crowd followed him. There were great musicians among the peris but the music of the prince soothed the nerves in a manner in which no one else's music could. Very soon, the guards of the king came up to him and said that the king desired him to go and play at the palace. The musician would not agree. He replied that he did not want anything from anyone and so was not desirous of going to the palace. On hearing this the king's ministers came up and said that the princess was suffering from burns all over the body and could not sleep. The king requested the musicians to play her to sleep. Atirupa now understood that this princess must be his beloved Chanchala. His heart beat within him so loud that he

was afraid everybody would hear it. Hiding his emotion, however, he said in an indifferent tone: "In that case, I do not mind going to the palace. I am always willing to do a good turn. Who knows! I may be able to cure the princess of her burns!"

The minister of the king took him at once to the king, who ushered him to the room of the princess. One glance was enough to convince the prince that this was his own Chanchala. She too recognized him and would have spoken, had not Atirupa given her a secret signal, which lovers know very well how to exchange, to keep quiet. He then told the king:

"Your Majesty, I have here a balm given to me by a super-physician for all affections of the skin. I am sure this will cure the princess."

So saying, he offered the clay phial to the maids and asked them to apply first to the feet of the princess. This was done. She felt greatly relieved and begged that the balm may please be used for all her burns. The stranger, the king, the ministers and all others except the maid retired and waited outside. In half an hour the princess herself walked out completely cured. The king was so relieved and happy that he offered to give the stranger anything he asked.

Atirupa, of course, asked for the hand of the princess. The king lost his temper at this impertinence and asked the guards to arrest the man. When they came forward the magic stick beat them up. Chanchala then told her father the whole story and begged him to allow her to go with the prince, her lover. He agreed :

"All right, then, you may go my wayward daughter, you always had strange desires."

The marriage of Atirupa and Chanchala was performed according to peri rights and they returned home. The King and all the courtiers wept at the departure.

Chanchala had two sisters who were exactly like her, because they were triplets. They refused to part with

their sister and wanted to go with her.

"Let them also come," said Atirupa. "I have two friends who are princes and who are dying to wed a peri each."

The father gave them his golden chariot that could fly through the air and they flew over the Himalayas. On the way, Atirupa met his two friends and took them also with him. Back in his country, the fathers of the friends were invited and the marriage of three peris was performed with great pomp and show and gladness.

QURBAN'S TREASURE

MANY many years ago there lived in Arabia a wood cutter called Abdulla. He worked hard, earned enough to live comfortably, but being a miser by nature, he lived on the barest of necessities and saved the rest in gold and silver coins. These coins he deposited in a mud pot in a corner in the kitchen and covered them with rice, to cheat any thieves who might try to steal his treasure. One day he thought he would take some money out of it and buy a hand-cart for carrying firewood. In this way, he could carry more fire wood to the market and earn more money.

When he went to the pot and dipped his hand in the rice, he heard a commanding voice say: "Do not touch it. This is Qurban's treasure."

Abdulla withdrew his hands and stared at the pot. There was not a soul in the room. Who then could have shouted? He opened the door and looked out. No, there was none there, either. Not satisfied, he stepped outside, closed the door behind him and locking it, he walked all around his house. He could see no one. Perhaps I must have imagined I heard a voice, he consoled himself, and opening the door he went in again, to take the money. Closing the door behind him and pushing the latch in place, he approached the pot. He dipped his hands in the rice and jumped in a terrific start. The voice from the void had spoken again: "Do not touch it. This is Qurban's treasure."

This time there was no doubt whatsoever. It was no human being that spoke. It was a voice from the void —ashariri as they call it in India—and the command was given in a tone that brooked no breach of the order.

"All right!" said Abdulla. "If it is Qurban's treasure, I will not take it. But let me see how Qurban is going to

get it."

With these words he went out of the house, took up a log of wood, chopped off a piece from the centre, brought it inside, put the coins in the hollow, closed it by the piece he had cut off and jammed it in place. The whole task was so cleverly done that no one would ever suspect that the wood had been cut open and patched up. While he did all this, the voice from the void kept absolutely silent. Abdulla then carried the log to the river, waded waist-deep into the water and threw it as far as he could, into the midstream where the current was fastest.

"There you are Qurban," he said, in a mocking tone, "take your treasure if you can."

The voice from the void did not speak. Abdulla went home and lay down in a rage. He did not eat or drink, or work or sleep that day. At night. he fell asleep out of hunger and the tiredness induced by his anger. The next morning, he saw things in a different light. "Did the voice speak? Even if it had why did I listen to its command? What a fool I was to throw the whole lot into the river? That at least was not necessary." These thoughts haunted him for several hours until at last he could bear it no longer.

He went to the river hoping against hope, that the log would have been washed ashore. But, no. The log had floated down the stream and Abdulla felt that he had lost it, once for all. What had happened was this. Several miles down the stream there was a small town. There on the river's bank, was a small firewood depot. The merchant thereof used to replenish his stock by logs and pieces of wood that floated down the river. As there was big timber cutting being done in the hills up the stream, very often logs of wood, big, middling and small would float down and provide him with stock for his depot. A precarious way of running a business, but paying enough to provide him with two meals

a day. Abdulla's log of wood containing the treasure had also been caught by the merchant who had long hooks for doing it. Not knowing what a treasure he had fished out, he threw it among the other logs. Just one more log, that was all that he thought about it.

That afternoon, a blacksmith of the place came and bought some firewood. His name was Qurban. The log with the treasure went to his lot. He took the bundle home, and began to chop them to make firewood. Nothing happened with the first one, two, three logs, but as soon as his axe hit the fourth log, it split open, spilling out the treasure of gold and silver coins. Qurban could not believe his eyes. He rubbed them to wake himself up. The coins were still there. He picked them up. They were solid and real to the touch. He called out to his wife so loud and so urgently that she came running out fearing that something serious had happened. When she saw the gold and the silver coins she at once brought a vessel gathered them and took them inside. "We shall wonder about it all, inside the house," she scolded. Whatever we do, let no one know that we have found a treasure."

Qurban followed her, sheepishly, still dazed by what had happened. Inside the house, behind closed doors, they tried to puzzle out how this treasure had come to be inside the piece of wood. After a time, they gave up their attempts by saying to themselves: "How can mortals understand the ways of providence!"

Qurban, still wondered "whose could this money be? Am I right in not finding him out and giving it to him?" His wife counselled otherwise. "If you proclaim that you found this treasure inside a log of firewood, no one will believe you. They will only think that we stole it. Moreover, how can we be sure that the man who claims it is not telling a lie? There may be a host of claimants who will start fighting with each other." So saying, she pacified her husband, deciding to keep the money without

spending it affluently, lest people should suspect how they had become rich so suddenly.

Abdulla in his house, could not sleep or eat or rest. He regretted his hasty action in throwing away his hard-earned treasure. The next morning he decided to go down the river in search of his log of wood. The whole day he walked. The next day too. Three days of search brought him nowhere near to finding his lost piece of firewood. On the fourth day he reached the town where his treasure also had landed. Straight, he went to the depot by the riverside and searched as a miser searches for his long lost bag of money, but had to return disappointed. The sun had set and the man was closing his shop. Abdulla, whom the depot keeper took to be someone slightly off his head, had to go out, not knowing what to do. Tired and weary, he sought shelter for the night. There were no hotels or inns in that overgrown village of a town. Abdulla knocked at people's doors and asked to be allowed to sleep there. The first three houses that he entered were rich men's mansions where there was plenty of space for an odd man to rest a night. The durwans guarding the doors would not let him in. The fourth house he knocked at was that of Qurban, who was poor, but a generous and hospitable person.

Abdulla stayed that night in Qurban's house. After supper they sat down for a quiet smoke on the hookah, when Abdulla narrated his story and the quest which had brought him to the place. Qurban now knew that the treasure he had found, had for its owner the way-farer whom he had given shelter for the night. He did not, however, disclose to Abdulla the story of his find.

Back in his own bedroom he told his wife of his discovery and between them they planned how to return the gold and silver coins to the rightful owner. It was true that they were poor, but they were an honest couple who did not want some one else's money, however hard their

need might be. Qurban's wife hit upon an idea. She would bake two very big nan-rotis (bread) for Abdulla to take with him for his mid-day meal on his way back. Inside the roti she would place the gold and silver coins.

The next day Abdulla thanked his host profusely and set out on his way back home, with the two big nan-rotis, packed neatly in leaves. A mile or so away his sandals gave way. He entered a cobbler's shop to get them repaired. As he had no money to pay for the repairs, he offered the cobbler the two rotis as payment for his work. The cobbler accepted the gift and started to stitch the sandals. At the first stitch the needle broke. He took another. That one also snapped. He took out his third and last one, which also broke. Cursing his bad luck, he looked in his tool box only to find that he had no more needles left. Asking Abdulla to wait there till he brought some needles, the cobbler went out. As he too had no money, he took the two rotis to pay for the needles.

Qurban received the roti, kept it aside and gave the cobbler half-a-dozen big strong long needles. He continued to work until lunch time on his anvil and then rose up to go home, taking with him the two rotis which was all the payment he had received that day. He was not sure how his wife would receive him when he reached there with his meagre fare. He need not have had any such fears. His wife at once recognized the rotis as the ones she had baked, and sure enough inside the rotis, there nestled the gold and silver coins—Qurban's treasure.

HIRA AND LAL

A POOR grass cutter, who earned a living by cutting grass in the jungle and selling it in the town, was one day so much engrossed in his work that he found himself still in the jungle even after the sun had set and dusk was fast darkening into night. He stopped cutting the grass and after gathering it into a heap looked around for the rope. To his dismay, he found that he had forgotten to bring the rope that day. What was he to do? How sad it would be to lose the efforts of a whole day's work, for want of a rope! In this despondent state, he was pleased to see a rope lying under a tree a few feet away. Quickly stepping up he took it to tie the grass. The rope was not long enough to bind all the grass that he had cut. "Let me save whatever I can," he said to himself, "a single rafter saved from a burning house is also a saving, so says the good old proverb." Consoling himself thus, he took the rope, or what he thought was a rope, and tied up the grass. Strange to say, the small rope proved to be enough to bind the big heap of grass he had cut in twelve long hours. In his eagerness to save as much as he could, he did not notice that the rope had become four times longer by the time he had bound the bundle of grass. Assuming the whole credit for this good luck to his own cleverness, he returned home, and dumping the grass in his verandah he untied the bundle.

As soon as the rope was taken out, he noticed in the lamp light that it was not a rope, but a snake. Dead or alive, he did not care to note. He shut his eyes and threw it away. A few moments later, he slowly opened his eyes. The snake was no longer there. Where was it? He looked all around but nowhere he found the snake. In its place, he saw a radiant ruby as big as a betel nut. Beside himself with surprise, he picked it and held it up between his

thumb and forefinger, against the light. It was bright. It was beautiful. It was precious. But of what use was it to a poor old grass cutter, who did not even have a wife? "All things unclaimed belong to the king," says another old proverb. The grass cutter decided he would make a present of it to the king.

Next morning he went, dressed in his dipali best, to pay respects to the king. The ministers, when they saw the ruby, at once brought him to the royal presence. The king accepted the ruby, which was the biggest jewel he had ever seen in his royal life, and gave the man a small house with a small compound attached to it, as his own for life, and for his heirs after it. The grass cutter returned home as happy as a bird.

After the court duties were over, the king went to the zenana, and calling the queen gave her the ruby. The queen was pleased: highly pleased at the outsize precious stone. But as soon as she received it, the ruby turned into a baby boy. The queen was surprised and immensely happy. Nobody could say whether she was more pleased than surprised, or more surprised than pleased. The king and queen had no child. They had prayed to the gods; given offerings at temples; fasted on all holy days; given alms to the poor; consulted astrologers for the boon of having an offspring. All in vain. At last, when they had given up all hopes, here was a lovely child given to them, as brilliant and warm as the baby sun after the darkest and coldest quarter of the night. As he was a ruby turned to a boy, they called him Lal, which means ruby.

TWO LOVERS

Lal grew up healthy, happy, lively, bright and beautiful. He was "the child," in everybody's eyes, as the expression goes. When he was five years of age, the parents sent him to a Gurukulam, to learn the three R's; as well as the arts of fencing and archery. In the Gurukulam, there was a

princess called Hira, put among the girls who were being taught home science by the Guru's better half. Hira and Lal became friends from childhood. As they grew up in age, their friendship flowered into love, and so they made up their minds to become man and wife.

When this news was carried to Lal's father, the King, was very angry. Hira's father and Lal's father were great enemies. The two families had been at strife with each other for three generations. Hira's father too was enraged when he heard that his daughter had fallen in love with Lal. His Vazir advised him that this might be only a young girl's fancy which would pass off once she was married away. Then and there, the king set about arranging for a bridegroom for his daughter. A neighbouring king sought her hand. He was middle aged, lame, squint-eyed and bent. All the same, his state was rich, he had a good army, thus making a very strong, rich and therefore, profitable ally. Hira's father agreed to the marriage and arranged for the ceremony to be performed with all the pomp and glory that a marriage between a rich king and a lovely princess demanded.

ELOPED!

Hira sent a message through a trustworthy brahmin to Lal to please come quick and save her from a marriage that would be her death. Lal galloped day and night on his horse, Thunder, and reached the town on the day previous to the marriage ceremony. The whole town was gaily decorated and there were huge holiday crowds everywhere. It looked as if all the houses had poured out humanity on to the streets which formed the confluence of streams of men and women from the suburbs, and surrounding villages. In this melee nobody had time to notice Lal. Nobody, that is, except Hira. From the balcony of the palace she noticed Lal, looking up and searching all the balconies for his beloved Hira. Their eyes met. Lal

made her understand what to do. She sent down her closest companion who met Lal in a secluded place in the garden. Between them they arranged for Hira's flight from the palace and an unhappy life as the wife of a one-eyed, lame and old man.

At dead of night, Hira dressed as a youth went out of the palace and without being noticed by anyone, met Lal at the prearranged hendezvous, outside the town. Lal was waiting there with two horses, both thoroughbred arabs, that could gallop faster than the wind. Lal was just fearing whether Hira could ever make it, when she arrived, almost without his noticing it. Dressed as a youth, she looked so much like Lal that they could be mistaken, one for the other. Without wasting any words or time over greetings they galloped away; far, far away from the capital. The next day they spent hiding in a forest by the side of a lake full of lotuses. They fed themselves with black berries, and drank the fresh water in the tank. In the afternoon, they again mounted their horses and rode west. Although they expected to be clear of the forest in a short while, three hours ride and the sunset saw them still in the forest. Very soon, it would be too dark to see the way. They did not very much relish the idea of spending the night in the forest. And so, when they saw a light, flickering far away, like a star that had fallen from the sky, they turned their horses towards it.

DANGER

In a few minutes they reached a house, surprisingly large for a forest dwelling. With walls made of roughly cut logs of wood, pillars made of whole trunks of trees, windows and doors, mere openings that are closed by trap doors of three inch thick planks, it looked more like a castle than a house. The light they had seen from a distance was on the terrace, a sort of look-out post. Altogether, a forbidding house. Hira and Lal would not have

entered its portals had they any other choice. Not having any, they knocked at the huge door. There was a shuffling of feet inside, a tremendous creaking sound as the door turned on its wooden hinges and an old woman appeared with a hand-lamp in her hand. She raised it to see who had knocked, smiled a silken smile and politely, very politely said: "Come in my children: come in. This is your house. Make yourself at home."

Hira and Lal walked in. A servant who seemed to have appeared from nowhere with a perpetual velvety smile on his face took care of the horses. The old woman showed them a vacant room with two cots, a table and a lamp in it and said: "This is your room. Be at home. I'll send you some food." She shuffled along and presently a very pretty maid appeared with a wooden bowl laden with fruits, and a goblet of brass with a long narrow neck full of water to drink. She entered, placed the bowl and goblet on the table and closed the door from inside.

Lal was thirsty. He went straight for the goblet, while Hira took the fruit bowl. The maid gave the bowl to Hira, but not the goblet. When Lal, astonished at this was about to protest, the maid silenced him by a silent gesture. She placed her forefinger on her lips and shook her head. Lal and Hira understood that there was something wrong. Their original fears when they saw the house for the first time, re-appeared. The maid told them in whispers not to stay there the night. The water contained a sleeping draught. In their sleep they would be butchered and eaten up, because the house belonged to two nishadas, —(giants who walk at night)— who were not at home just then but would be returning any moment now. Hira and Lal did not require any further persuasion. They did not touch the fruits either, although the maid told them that they could safely take it. The news of imminent danger had driven away their thirst, their hunger, and their tired feeling with lightning effect. They came out of the room and profusely thanked the hostess for her

hospitality.

But, said they, we have no more time to waste, and went out. The old woman tried her best to stop them from going away. She said that the night was young, the way was long and the path dangerous. They could go in the morning. Nothing could persuade Hira and Lal to stay. They mounted their horses and flew away into the jungle, away from certain death at the hands of nishadas.

LAL IS KILLED

They had not gone a hundred yards when the sons of the old woman, the two nishadas, returned from their daily depredations, loaded with four corpses of jungle folk whom they had killed for food. Their mother shouted out to them, that a couple of very stout morsels were running away, urging them to go after the couple and capture them. The two sons threw the corpses down and galloped their horses in the direction shown by their mother.

The chase continued for an hour. The nishadas were closing in on Hira and Lal. Being used to wandering at night the nishadas could see very well, but Lal could not see well enough to fight. Fortunately, his guru had taught him the famous feat in archery known as Sabda-Bhedini, which means shooting at an enemy by the help of sound alone. He used this skill and the younger brother who was in the forefront of the chase, fell down dead pierced by an arrow through his heart. The elder brother gave up the chase, dismounted, took up his brother's body and returned sad and dejected, leading the other horse, home to his mother. That night the old woman felt for the first time, the pain which her sons had given to so many mothers in the past.

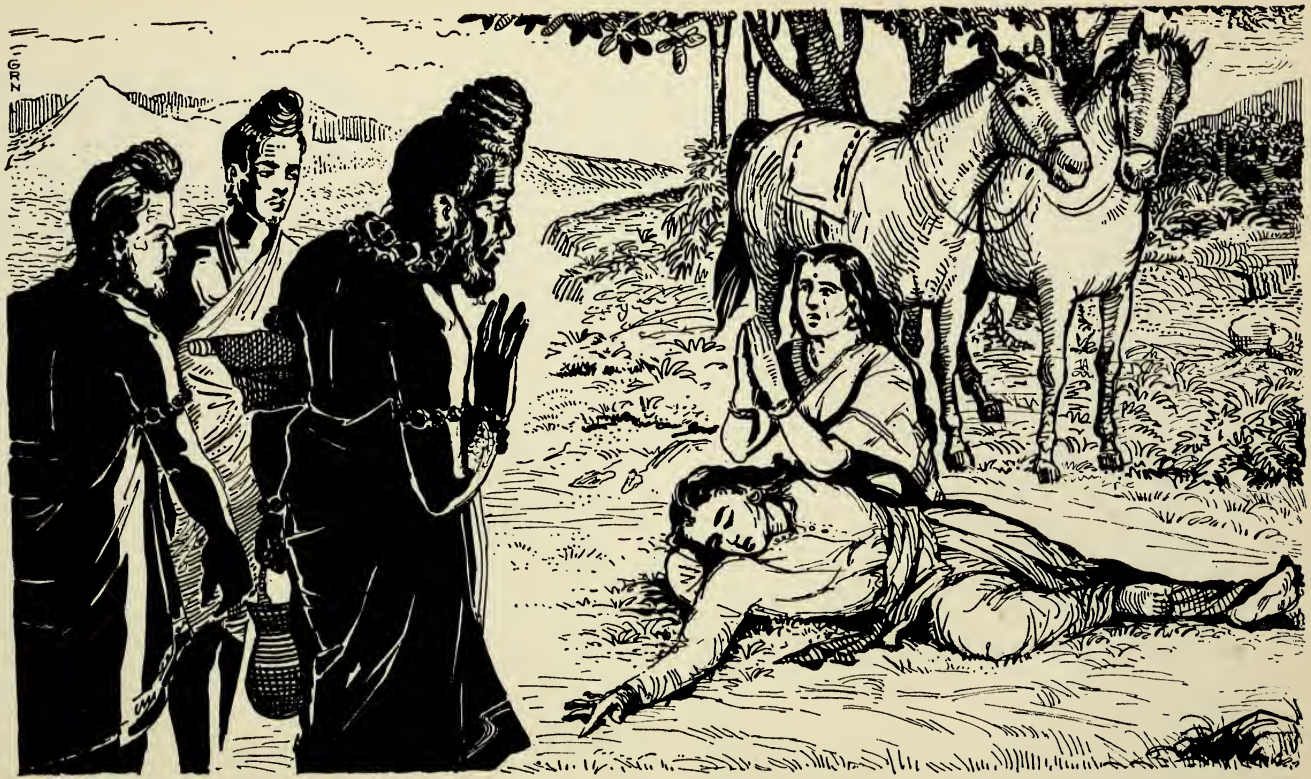
Hira and Lal continued on their way. They did not stop to rest for the whole night. The next morning they reached a small town, there they stopped by the public well,

rested their horses, gave them water to drink and entering a serai (inn) partook of the rough fare prepared by the cook and lay down for a while. In a short time they were fast asleep; their tiredness and the relief of having escaped twice from great danger in a single night, inducing a deep sleep into them. When they woke up it was evening. They thought of starting out again to some place where they could live in peace. A big town or city is the best place to hide. No one there would be curious to know who the strangers were. Coming out to the place where they had tethered their horses, they saw there three horses instead of two. By the side of the third horse, there stood a wayfarer who saluted them respectfully. Very soon, they became acquainted, and the wayfarer told them that he was going east to the great city of Pataliputra. Hira and Lal were glad to hear this, and pleased to have him as their guide. The three of them started on their journey to Pataliputra.

A couple of hours later, night set in and they entered a jungle. In this lonely place, the wayfarer took advantage of the darkness and stabbing Lal in the back, galloped away out of sight. He was no other than the elder nishada who had followed them in disguise to wreak his vengeance for the death of his younger brother.

BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE

Hira got down from the horse, laid the head of Lal in her lap and wept bitterly at the death of her lover and her husband. It so happened that at that time Brahaspathy, the guru of the gods in heaven, happened to pass that way with his disciples. Seeing a damsel in distress, the kind guru descended from the skies and asked her the reason for her sorrow. He saw Lal lying motionless and heard from Hira how their companion had killed him. Brahaspathy, knew the great manthra (spell) called Mritha Sanjeevani, which means "that which revives the dead."



HIRA AND LAL

He uttered this great manthra and Lal woke up as if from a dream. Hira and Lal fell at the feet of the guru of the gods with devotion and gratitude. Brahaspathy blessed them saying, "Live and be wise," and ascended to the skies.

Hira was beside herself with glee and gratitude at having got back her Lal. They both mounted their horses and rode on, keeping a sharp lookout lest the nishada should attack them again. Nothing happened. They went on their way passing by rivers, climbing hills, crossing brooks, staying at wayside inns in villages and towns, for several days, until at last they reached a big town which they liked so much that they decided to stay there. Just inside the boundary wall of the town on the north side of the gate there was a serai where they got a room to themselves along with other wayfarers.

LAL TURNED INTO A GOAT

In the morning, Lal left Hira behind and went out to explore the town and find out some occupation for himself; for he had decided to make this place his home. As he passed through the main road, which was also the main bazaar, he bought various things, like vegetables, fruits, rice, dal, firewood, oil, telling each shop-keeper to keep them there for him: he would gather them on his return journey. At the end of the main road, there were two footpaths one leading north and the other north-east. Out of sheer curiosity he took the north-east path. It led him to a small cottage standing all by itself amidst a betel leaf farm. An old woman with matted hair, forehead besmeared with ashes sat in the verandah muttering some spell, keeping count on a rudrakhsa mala (a kind of rosary). Lal was tired and thirsty after his long walk through the bazaar. He stepped up to the house and asked for water to drink. The old woman got up, smiled a toothless smile, asked him to sit down while she went inside to fetch him

a drink. Lal sat there idly watching the skull and bones on the door lintel, with a tiger's head carved above it. The old woman came out, not with water, but with sweet sherbat of ruby red colour. Lal gulped the whole of it down as parched earth drinks up the first shower of summer rain. No sooner had he finished drinking than he felt giddy. His eyes turned hazy. He lost his consciousness and became a goat.

Yes. The old woman was a sorceress. Poor Lal did not know it.

Hira waited all day long, and when Lal did not return she got terribly frightened. Who knows what fresh harm had overtaken him! She spent a sleepless night the hours of which crept slowly like a snail. The next morning she set out in search of Lal. Needless to say she was still dressed as a youth and in her youth's costume she looked very much like Lal. When she entered the main street therefore, all the shopkeepers one by one asked her why she had not come yesterday to collect the things she had paid for. Hira knew that Lal had passed that way. Telling them to wait she passed on from shop to shop, until she reached the end of the street. At the place where the street forked into two footpaths, she stood hesitating which way to proceed. On the north she saw nothing. Towards north-east, she saw a cottage and so proceeded along that path. In a short while she too reached the cottage where Lal was living as a goat.

When Hira arrived at the cottage the old woman invited her also with sweet words of welcome to come inside and refresh herself with food and sherbat. Hira did not enter. The old woman's matted hair, the peculiar rosary of rudraksha, the tiger's face on the top of the door with the skull and bones, told her that the old woman was a sorceress.

Passing further on she saw an ancient temple, all but deserted but for a poojari, or priest, who performed daily poojah (ceremonial prayers) to the goddess Shakti (the all-

pervading force in the universe worshipped as the mother of the world)—Hira went up and fell prostrate in prayer before the image of the goddess and prayed with all her heart and soul. As she rose up, she saw standing before her a nun, a devotee of the goddess; dressed in saffron clothes, with sandalwood ashes besmeared on her forehead, a kamandal (or vessel in which she received alms) and a trident. The nun of sparkling eyes, smiled at Hira and said:

"I am glad you came. I know why you have come. Your lover and husband Lal is living in the house of the sorceress as a goat. I shall give you the power to release him. Go, take this little bunch of Kusha grass. It has magical properties bestowed by goddess Shakti. Give this to the goat to eat and Lal will become a man once again. The sorceress will rush to attack you. Do not be afraid. She can do you no harm. Here; take these sacred ashes. Throw them at her when she comes near you and she will at once change her form and nature. For she is none but a Gandharva Kanya, a woman of Gandharva tribe, who has been cursed to be a sorceress. The holy ashes will purify her and restore her to her former good self.

Hira did as she was told to do. She knew that the results would be astonishing. But she never knew that it would be as astounding as she found it to be. The old woman turned into a beauty that turned the head of not only men, but even of all women who looked at her. She blessed Hira and told her:

"My dear sister. You do not know the great fortune you have won in the form of your husband. He is a gem. But, whatever you do, never try to find out who he is in reality—for then he will disappear.

THE END

The mischief was done. Hira as a lover and a wife never for a moment wanted to lose Lal. But her curiosity as a woman quite overcame her very soon. Once they

settled down, she tried to find out ways and means of discovering the origin of Lal. She had heard vague rumours that he was not the real son of the king. That was about all. She knew nothing more. At first, she asked Lal. He gave vague replies. She pressed him for an answer. Lal advised her not to be curious. She became angry. Lal informed her that it was dangerous to know the truth. She cajoled him. Lal told her that he could disclose his identity only at the risk of disappearing from her sight. At this, her wonder and curiosity only increased.

Finally, when all his efforts failed, Lal took her by the side of the river Narmada. Leaving her on the bank, he waded into the water. When he was knee deep in water, he asked her, " do you still want to know who I am?" she said, "Yes." Lal went further. The water was waist high. "Are you sure, you want to know the secret?" he asked in a grave voice. "Yes," she replied. "Let me have some idea. I'll stop just before we reach the stage where you disappear." Lal waded further into the river. When the water was shoulder high he cast a despairing look at Hira. "Do you still insist on knowing the mystery?" he asked. "I would like to," she said. He went further up. This time the waters were up to his nose. His looks plainly told her, "please do not proceed further in unravelling the mystery of my birth." Hira said, "so far you have not given me even a glimpse of what it is." Lal went down. Only his tuft of hair floated on the surface of the water, like a snake. Very soon the tuft turned into a real snake and swam away. No one knows where.

THE FAITH OF A CHILD

GOPAL was a small boy, five years old. He had lost his father when he was hardly three. His mother, a poor widow looked after Gopal, her only jewel on earth, working in the paddy fields when paddy is sown and again when it is harvested. At other times she did household chores in rich people's houses. She considered the gods, especially Lord Krishna, as her sole support in life.

> We have no other support Oh! Lord
> Thou are the only support we have
> In thy abundance of love
> Protect us, Oh! Lord, protect us

This grand old prayer, which she had learnt at the Bhajans in the temple, she repeated with utmost faith 108 times both at dawn and at dusk every day without fail. In a corner of the single room which formed her house, there was a small image of Krishna, with a lighted lamp in front. There she prayed, while her son sat silent and reverent by her side. He had done so, ever since he could recollect, until at last Lord Krishna had become for him a third person in the house; an elder brother, as it were, who loved him and protected him.

"Whatever is good for us, that Krishna will provide," she used to tell her son. They had no money to perform grand poojahs as rich people did. "But, that does not matter, my son," Gopal's mother taught him. "I am pleased if you offer as much as a petal of a flower—that is the promise Krishna gave to his bhaktas (devotees)," she told him. This too, she had heard from the lips of a sadhu (religious mendicant) at the temple who was giving a learned lecture on the Gita. All the rest of what he said, she could not understand, much less remember. But this

promise of the Lord, stuck in her mind as a deep faith and she bestowed that faith to her little son of five.

When Gopal completed his fifth year in life, his mother got him admitted in a small school in the village to learn to read and write. It was only half a mile away from their house; but most of the way was through a jungle, with only a cattle-path winding through it. The first few days his mother took him to school herself. When the school hours were over, she was there to take him back. As soon as she knew that Gopal had learnt the way to and from school, she told him: "Now, my son, you must go and come on you own. Your mother has no much work to do, to earn our food and cook it too, that she cannot go with you."

Gopal obeyed and went alone to school. He returned also on his own. The first day he was afraid. The next day a startled owl screeched and flew away hardly a yard from Gopal. He trembled with fear. The strange silence, and the still stranger sudden noises, seemed to grip him by the throat. After three days, he was sure, he could no longer go along that way without company. He told his mother so. She somehow pacified him and sent him to school the next day also. Gopal obeyed. But returning home at dusk, alone, unfriended, melancholy, slow, he told his mother: "No mother, I cannot go alone. All the other boys go different ways. They have brothers, and cousins and friends to keep them company. I have to walk the jungle, all by myself."

That night, Gopal's mother prayed with all her heart for some way out of this trouble. She somehow did not want her son to stop his studies. "Whatever you do, teach him to read and write"—were the last words of Gopal's father. After her prayers, she sighed. Then she smiled, and ran her fingers through Gopal's hair. She kissed him on the head, a sign of a mother's heartfelt blessing; the most moving moment for any Indian boy. Gopal looked up at his mother.

"Tomorrow you will have company," she said. "Your dada (elder brother) will go with you."

"Will he?" asked the boy; half doubtful, half-believing.

He had seen Krishna dada, helping them out, several times. When he had no dhoti to change, a rich lady celebrated her son's birthday and presented all the poor with dhotis. Gopal got two. Krishna dada gave these to you, was what his mother told him. On another day, someone else gave them a kid, which was now a full grown goat, giving them milk. "Everything we get is given by Krishna dada," was what mother had taught him. "God helps us through the deeds of men," she explained in the language of the peasants of India. All the same, he had never seen Krishna dada face to face. He had only felt his presence.

The next day, when he reached the forest he called out, "Krishna dada, Krishna dada, where are you?" The sound of tingling bells, such as god Krishna wore when he was a cowherd boy, reached his ears. The boy stopped dead. The sound came closer and closer, until at last, Gopal saw a boy twelve years old come and take him by the hand. The peacock feathers tucked in his coiffure, the garlands of wild flowers, the flute in his hand, the dusk coloured form the golden yellow dhoti and the jingling anklets round his ankles, were all exactly as he had seen in the image at home. But Oh! the eyes were so brave and kind, so determined and soft, so serious and so smiling, all at the same time. Gopal was beside himself with pleasure. Hand in hand, they romped along up to the edge of the forest, where dada took leave of his ward. "Go now Gopal," he said in the sweetest of tones, "I'll be here at dusk to take you back." Gopal went skipping, more than walking, until he reached his school.

Time passed in this way for Gopal, who was happy in his new dada's company. Sometimes they gathered flowers for Gopal's mother's poojah. Sometimes they imitated the cry of the Koel (cuckoo) and followed it. Sometimes

they chased butterflies. Gopal narrated all these adventures to his mother. She did not know what to make of it. She listened with rapt attention. Her prayers to Krishna became longer, her devotion deeper and her faith more firm.

One day, Gopal's teacher asked him whether he was not afraid to go alone through the jungle. That day, there was a small drama in the school and it was already dark.

"No. Sir," replied Gopal. "My dada Krishna keeps me company."

The teacher knew Gopal was the only son of his mother. Who could be this dada then? The teacher became curious. The boy's description of his Krishna dada, left the teacher dumb-founded. Did the boy actually succeed in making god Krishna appear as a boy? Wonder of wonders! The teacher was anxious to see this miracle. He offered to go with the boy.

"I would also like to see your dada," he said.

Gopal and his teacher went home together. When they reached the jungle, dada did not appear. Gopal called out to him. No reply. He called out as loud as he could, again and again and again. Echo only answered. The boy began to cry. He was afraid, his teacher would think that he was lying. The teacher never thought of suspecting the boy. He pacified him: "God appears when there is no one else to support—that, my son, is what the holy books say. He appears to little children, whose hearts are pure. I have to become as pure as a child in heart, to see him," he explained. Gopal did not understand. His sobs had not stopped, even when he reached home. When he saw his mother he burst into tears.

The teacher told Gopal's mother all that had happened. Both of them did not know how to explain the miracle. "God is fond of children" was all that they could say.

Towards the end of the year, there was an annual function of the school, with a feast for the teachers and the taught. Every boy brought something for the feast: rice,

THE FAITH OF A CHILD

dal, cabbages, brinjals, lady's fingers, sugar and milk; everyone promised something. Poor Gopal! he alone had nothing to offer. He cried bitterly and told his mother that he would not go for the feast unless she gave him something to take. She was sad and helpless. In her distrees, she prayed for light. After her prayers she smiled, and kissing Gopal on the forehead, said: "Don't cry my son. Your dada will help us out of this. Ask him." Gopal was not quite sure of the result. Even so, there was nothing else to be done. So the next day he asked his dada, what he could take for the feast in the school.

"You tell your teacher, that you will bring curds," said Krishna dada.

The promise pleased him. Gopal had heard that Lord Krishna was very fond of curds. He was sure, Krishna dada would give him curds, plenty of curds.

When Gopal promised to bring curds, the teachers and the boys in the school could not believe it. They knew Gopal was the poorest boy in the school. For him, to bring enough curds for fifty people was impossible. They pitied him. They did not expect him to keep his promise. The boys were about to laugh at him: but the teacher, who knew the mystery, stopped them and said: "Yes, Gopal will bring curds. Plenty of curds. I know he will." The boys were silenced.

The day of the annual festival arrived. The boys came in one by one with their promised things: rice, dal, cabbages, brinjals, potatoes, vegetables, milk and sugar. Gopal was not to be seen. "Will he come?" "He won't," said some. "He will," said the others. The teacher was grave. He was looking out to the fringe of the jungle; anxiety, hope, and devotion were clearly seen in his eyes. His seriousness quietened even the boys. At long last, Gopal appeared. He had a mud vessel in his little hands, a small vessel which could hold hardly enough for one boy to take. The boys smiled. The teacher did not smile. He received the vessel from Gopal as a devotee receives the

prasadam (offerings) from the priest in the temple. He emptied the curd into a plate. The vessel was still full. He emptied it again into another plate. The vessel was still full. He emptied it again into another plate. The vessel was still full! Again and again and again, he emptied it, until fifty plates were filled; and yet the vessel was full of curd.

He raised his hands in prayer to god Krishna.

"Oh! Lord, thou hast not been benign to give me your darshan (the blessing of seeing your form). But thou hast shown us the miracle of a child's faith. That is enough. Hallowed be thy name! Thy kingdom on earth is in our nurseries."

THE BLACK WARRIOR

FAR away, in the land of Arabia, there lived, a long time ago a great warrior called Anthar. A leader of one of the several nomadic tribes, he used to guard, protect and lead his tribe in their frequent journeys from place to place. A tall, dark and handsome youth, Anthar was as wise as he was handsome, as brave as he was wise, as formidable in battle as he was brave, and above all an unselfish and lovable leader ready to lay down his life for the safety of his tribe. When he was fifteen, he carried a camel on his shoulders. At sixteen, he fought and killed an elephant that had gone masth (mad).

There were, in his home town, a gang of robbers of whom everybody was afraid. Anthar gathered half-a-dozen brave fighters around himself, and with their help he fought the gang of robbers, routed them and drove them away. Some repented and joined his small band as protectors of the tribe. Arabia was then troubled by dacoits who waylaid caravans and looted them. Anthar and his band of protectors guarded their tribe whenever they moved from one place to another. Not knowing the fighting qualities of Anthar, a group of dacoits attacked them. Anthar fought like a tigress defending her cubs. Seventy to eighty dacoits were killed, and a half-a-dozen or so fled away to tell the tale to their brother dacoits. Ever since that day, nobody dared to attack Anthar's tribe.

Once Anthar's tribe started on a long journey, on the tenth day of the moon, in the spring. Travelling by moonlight at night, resting in the heat of the day, the caravan moved on from place to place for four days. A group of dacoits followed the caravan at a respectful distance, on both sides of their flanks, without daring to attack them. Anthar and his band of youths were there on horseback guarding the camels, the women and children, and their

valuable possessions, carried on camel backs and palanquins. On the night of the full moon, when the bright armour of Anthar shone brighter than the rest, one of the dacoits wounded him with a poisoned arrow. Anyone else would have fallen on the spot. Not so Anthar. He was no ordinary man. He got down from the horse, halted the caravan and discussed their future plan of action.

The next night was the last of their journey. If they could keep the dacoits at arm's length till the dawn, they would have reached their destination in the land of the tribe of Abbas, who were their kinsmen. Anthar's brave wife Abla held back her tears, tended her husband's wound, gave him refreshing medicinal herbs to take and looked after him like the dutiful Arab warrior's wife that she was. In this manner, the whole day passed. The sun went down in a blazing red sky. Darkness spread over the land for a short while, and then the moon rose in the east. It was time to start their journey once again. Anthar made Abla, his tall brave sturdy wife, wear his armour, mount his steed and take his place among the guards. The journey was resumed. Anthar took rest in his wife's palanquin.

The dacoits watched the caravan start. They did not have the courage to attack until they were sure that Anthar was completely put out of action, if not killed, by the arrow which had hit him. They followed the caravan hiding themselves behind the rocks as much as possible. When they saw Anthar's black horse back among the guards, ridden by Abla, they thought that Anthar himself was back on guard duty. This did not surprise them. His strength was so well known. "He can achieve anything; even his dead body can guard a whole caravan," said the leader of the dacoits. "Let no one be foolish enough to approach so long as that lion of a man is on his feet."

For some two hours, the dacoits followed the caravan, closely watching their movements. At last, the leader called his lieutenants and had a consultation. "I suspect

that the rider on Anthar's horse is his wife and not Anthar. She is already tired and has begun to stoop under the weight of the armour. She cannot hold the spear aloft for long, it droops now and then. What little of the face we can see from the distance shows that it is snowy white. That is not by any means the black warrior whom we see on Anthar's horse." The others were not quite so sure. Such was their respect for Anthar that they had to be doubly sure before they could be persuaded to attack the travellers guarded even by a wounded Anthar.

The Chieftain had a plan. "Let us feign an attack. Ride up to them in full war cry. Approach not too close. Remain far enough to escape if need be and yet close enough to pounce a surprise attack." The followers agreed. With a wild shout that echoed and re-echoed among the rocks all around, they closed in for the kill. The guards without Anthar were like a fishing net without the lead weights: ineffective and purposeless. Abla, brave girl as she was, trembled. For a moment it looked as if everything was lost. But no battle is lost until it is won by the enemy. It was lucky that the dacoits had not come up silently to kill. Their strategy of a war cry turned out to be a help for Anthar and his tribe. While the dacoits were still far enough, Anthar jumped out of the palanquin, sword in hand and roared like a lion: "Come up and fight, you rascals!" Anthar's appearance made the blood flow faster in the veins of his guards. They became suddenly alive and alert to a man. The dacoits turned right about and dispersed like silk cotton scattered by the wind. Anthar held another war conference. "We are," said he, "within a mile of a narrow passage between impassable hills. When we reach there I will stand guard at the mouth of the passage. All of you pass on as fast as you can. In a couple of hours it will be day. One hour's journey in daylight should bring you to the land of Abbas our kinsmen. As soon as daylight breaks, I shall leave the post and rejoin you."

So saying, Anthar himself stood guard at the pass. Legs astride, leaning on his horse, supporting himself by his spear struck vertically on the ground, he stood there a tower of strength. The caravan passed on, Abla casting back long and lingering looks at Anthar, as if she would take him with her, if looks could draw a man, as a magnet draws iron.

The dacoits also gathered near the pass. They had intended to attack from the rear in the dark passage, where moonlight did not enter. They could not do so. Anthar was there, a one man gate, as it were, closed effectively against them. They were thirty, while he was single handed. Even then they dared not attack. They waited to see what he would do. The chieftain of the dacoits forbade his archer from sending a single arrow. He had too much respect for the black warrior who was standing guard at the narrow pass, single handed, although the pass was broad enough for three men to attack him at a time.

The couple of hours before dawn passed in this manner with the dacoits waiting for Anthar to make the first move. The sun rose. Still Anthar did not move. An hour passed and he was still at his post. This was strange. The Captain slowly crept up to him, reached closer and closer until he was barely an arm's length from Anthar. With his sword drawn ready to defend or attack, the chieftain warily watched Anthar who was as still as a statue. One of the dacoits who got up on the left shoulder of the pass, dislodged a big stone. The Captain cursed. The stone fell at the horses' feet. It bolted away. Anthar fell flat, having lost the support of his horse. He was dead. In fact he had been dead for a couple of hours.

The Captain of the dacoits came up, saluted his dead body and exclaimed: "Verily was it said of you that even your dead body can save a whole tribe from its enemies. All honour to you, Anthar. We shall give

you a burial worthy of you. Your body shall continue to guard the passage which you defended with your life."

A NOTORIOUS PAIR OF SANDALS

MANY, many years ago, there lived in Istanbul, the capital of Turkey, a merchant called Kashmy, who had a very very old pair of sandals. They were so very old that no one who knew him, remembered seeing him in any other pair; and any one who saw him once, remembered him ever afterwards on account of them. It came to a stage where you could ask any street urchin in Istanbul: "whose are the sandals?" And he would answer straightway: "Kashmy's sandals." Their soles were repaired, patched up, and added to, such a large number of times that they had become ten and then fifteen and a half centimetres thick. He used to drag them when he walked, as children do when they put on grandpa's jolly old slippers. The uppers had been torn and stiched up, torn and repaired, torn again and made whole again, until at last the pieces that made up the uppers were of several ages, several shades, and several types of leather. People looked at them and smiled, boys looked at them and laughed, little girls looked at them and giggled. All these jeers of everybody around him could not make Kashmy change his comfortable sandals.

One fine day, Kashmy got up late. The sun had risen earlier and was smiling on his face when he got up. He put on his jubba and his pattaloons. Slipping his feet into his comfortable pair of slippers, he went out in a hurry to the public baths, looking neither left nor right on the way. He was in a hurry because he had a business deal to do that day. And he was absent-minded as he walked, because the deal he had to do happened to be a ticklish piece of deal. He reached the baths and entered one of them, leaving his famous pair of sandals outside the door. A bunch of mischievous boys who came that way saw the

sandals of Kashmy. They also saw close by another pair of sandals, beautifully made of black velvet, embroidered with gold lace. The leader of the gang had an idea; a mischievous idea:

"Whose are those sandals?" he asked the others.

"Kashmy's sandals, of course," came the chorus of a reply.

At the leader's suggestion, one of them quietly ran up and exchanged the two pairs of sandals. They then hid themselves behind pillars and walls to watch the result. Kashmy came out, slipped his feet into the lovely pair of sandals and walked away in a hurry not knowing what he was doing. He was absent-minded, because he had a ticklish piece of deal to finish that day. The boys were highly pleased with the quick results and waited with wide open eyes and tightly clenched fists for the rest of the drama to be played. A rich man dressed in spotless white, with a beard cut in a perfect circle, came out. He was about to put on his sandals, when he noticed that they were not his pretty velvet sandals but an ugly old pair belonging to someone else. He looked round for his own pair. The boys pulled in their heads like so many turtles. The man's sandals were nowhere to to be seen. They must have been stolen. "But, by whom?" "Of course, by the man who had left his sandals in its place." And,

"whose were those sandals?"

"Kashmy's sandals! of course."

He carried the pair of sandals straight to the magistrate to lodge a complaint against Kashmy. The boys went their way happy and contented.

The magistrate looked at the sandals. He thought they belonged to Kashmy. He asked his constable to confirm his own surmise.

"Whose are these sandals?"

"Kashmy's of course"—was the ready reply.

The magistrate was convinced that Kashmy must have

been the culprit. When the pretty pair of sandals was found in his possession, Kashmy had no defence to make. He was fined thirty silver pieces. Paying the fine, he returned home, sad and angry. He decided to throw away the sandals so that no one would ever see them. He packed them up in cloth, tied the packet to a piece of stone and threw it, as far as he could, into the river.

One fine day, the sun smiled on a pair of fishermen who were out early in their fishing boat, throwing their net in the river. Something heavy was caught in the net. They hauled it up, glad that they had caught a big fish. To their annoyance, however, they found that what they had hauled up was no fish at all, but just a bundle. Their first impulse was to throw it away. One of them had an idea. Let us open it up, for who knows, it might contain something valuable, the man proposed. They opened the packet and saw a pair of sandals.

"Whose were the sandals?"

"Kashmy's of course."

They tied them up back into a packet and threw it out. Flying in through the window of a big house, the packet landed in a room on the first floor inside the room, there was a big glass jar of perfume more fragrant than any other made anywhere in Turkey. It was so rich that one drop of it could make a hundred drops of scent, and still you could get its sweet smell several yards away. The packet not only landed in that very room, but it also shattered the jar of perfume, into a thousand pieces. The scent was split all over. The whole room was filled with strong suffocating smell.

In the afternoon, when the perfume-maker came home, the first thing that greeted him at the door was the sweet scent of his perfume. He was pleased that even in a closed jar, it made its presence felt so far. When he climbed the stairs, he wondered whether he had left the jar open. By the time he reached the door he feared that someone had broken the jar. And, of course, he was

right. His jar was shattered into a thousand pieces and the scent was spilt all over the room. He looked about for the cause when he saw a wet packet. Opening the packet he saw inside an old pair of sandals.

"Whose were the sandals?"

"Kashmy's of course."

The perfume-maker took the sandals and went straight to the magistrate to lodge a complaint against Kashmy. The magistrate fined him fifty silvers. Paying the fine Kashmy returned home more angry than sad.

Water could not destroy the sandals. I shall try fire this time, said Kashmy to himself as he walked back home. There he placed it on the window sill to dry, before throwing them into the fire. Now, Kashmy's room was on the second floor of a street house. A crow smelt fish and pocked at the sandals. They fell down, and landed plumb on the bald head of a man passing by the house. They produced a crack on the skin of his head, blood oozed out. The man looked up and then down. There, on the street, was lying a very old pair of sandals.

"Whose were the sandals?"

"Kashmy's sandals, of course."

The man recognized them in an instant. He took the sandals straight to the magistrate to lodge a complaint against Kashmy. The magistrate fined Kashmy seventy pieces of silver. Kashmy paid the fine and returned home more angry than ever.

What does not dissolve it: fire has not destroyed it. What shall he do? He had an idea. He'll bury the cursed pair; bury them in no less a place than the cemetry itself. He waited till the sun went down and all the place was dark. Then he carried the packet of sandals under his arm and quietly and secretly went to the cemetry, buried the sandals there and came away happy that he had at last given them a proper burial.

Now, in those days, people in Istanbul used to bury money and valuables too, along with corpses in their

graves. Some people noticed newly turned up earth on one of the graves. They thought that thieves had dug up the grave to steal money and valuables. A complaint was brought to the magistrate. He sent officials and grave diggers to see if anything was stolen. They found that the coffin was intact. Nothing was stolen. But in the process they also found that a packet had been interned in the grave. They opened the packet and saw a very very old pair of sandals.

"Whose were the sandals?"

"Kashmy's, of course"—they all knew it.

The man was brought before the magistrate and charged with the crime of insulting the dead by burying a pair of sandals in the grave. The magistrate fined him ninety pieces of silver. Paying the fine Kashmy returned home. He was determined to get rid of the sandals somehow or other.

But how would he do it? Sinking, burning and burying had all failed. What could he do? There was one way left. He would throw them away on the top of hill, in the heart of the jungle. He waited till the sun went down and all the place was plunged in darkness. Then carrying the packet under his arm he walked up the hill, outside the town, right into the heart of the jungle. There, near a lonely fountain flowing out of a rock he threw the pair of slippers, and returned home washing his hands in the clean spring. He had at last got rid of them, for good.

Two months had not passed when the notorious pair of sandals, again struck. The water supply in the town was mysteriously cut off. There was nothing wrong with the pipes, or with the mains. The channel feeding the reservoir was not flowing. Engineers tried to find out why. Walking up the channel they reached the forest on the hill to the very source of the river that fed the channel. There, they saw, an old, wet, swollen packet covering up the fountain, diverting the flow of water

away from the mouth of the channel. The bundle was opened and a pair of very old sandals was found.

"Whose were the sandals?"

"Kashmy's, of course."

This time the authorities took more serious notice of the event. Kashmy was fined heavily and threatened with exile if his notorious sandals gave any more trouble. Kashmy paid the fine, took the sandals home and locked them up in a safe in his bedroom.

The sandals never left his room as long as he lived.

The story of the sandals however travelled far and wide, until it reached India along two different trade ways. Arab traders brought this and other stories, along with merchandise to the coast of Kerala. It also reached Punjab, via Persia and Afghanistan. The two tales have slight differences. In the Punjab the school boys have heard of it as Karim Khan Ka Joota. The adventures as given here were heard in Kerala, straight from the Arab's mouth and handed down from grandfather to grandson for a few hundred years.

THE FOUR RIDDLES

SHAMU and Ramu were twin sons of the chief minister of a king in Rajasthan. They were very bright boys and everyone foresaw a good future for them. Unfortunately, when they were only sixteen years of age their father died. As a reward for the great services the minister had rendered to the king and country, the king wished to appoint the two sons in some good posts suitable to the sons of ministers. He called the second minister who had succeeded the dead official, and expressed his wish. The second minister was not a good man. He used to be jealous of the success and popularity of the chief minister. Here was an opportunity for doing an ill turn to his former boss; a thing which he dared not do while the chief was alive.

"Of course, your majesty," he replied. "After all, my boss's sons are like my own sons to me." So saying, he wiped a starting tear, and continued: "But, your majesty, there is something I have to tell you before your majesty decides what office is to be given to these boys."

"What is that?"

"As your majesty knows, I hate to speak ill of the dead. Nobody should do so; and yet my duty to my king and country forces me to do this unpleasant task. I hope your majesty will not be annoyed with me."

"No, I shall not be annoyed," assured the king. "Speak out the truth without fear."

"Your majesty, the chief minister always lived above his means. When he died he was still owing me three thousand rupees. I do not want it back. After all, he was my bosom friend, and we have all to be of help to one another. Even so, with this history behind them, it would not be proper to appoint the boys in high posts. Persons who are used to living above their income are

likely to take bribes or misuse public money."

The king was surprised at this news. He was sad that his late minister had misused his position. "In that case," he ordered, "give them some small jobs in the palace; jobs that will not give them any chance to yield to temptation."

The minister agreed to do so and promptly appointed Shamu as a bearer and Ramu as an assistant to the palace gardener. The two boys came to know of all that had passed between the king and the minister from one of the king's bodyguards, who, like all others in the palace, loved the late chief minister as much as he hated the new one. The boys did not show in any way that they had come to know of the evil intentions of the chief minister. Accepting the low jobs given to them, they decided to get even with the minister by some means or other, in the near future.

Several days passed by without anything special happening. Shamu and Ramu carried out their duties as a bearer and a gardener to the complete satisfaction of their bosses. Even the king came to know of this. He hoped that very soon they would learn to be frugal, after which he could give them better positions more suited to their father's status and their own intelligence and wisdom.

One day, while the king happened to be alone with Shamu, he noticed that the boy was extremely quiet and asked him the reason for his sadness.

"What is the matter, Shamu? You look unusually thoughtful today. Is there anything you want?"

"No, your majesty. I am quite content with what I have. What makes me thoughtful is, however, a certain question that has been puzzling me for some time. When my father was alive, we used to ask him about anything that puzzled and he used to encourage us to discuss such matters, helping us with directions and wise hints. In that manner we used to solve them. Now, alas! I am no longer able to do so."

"Never mind. Pose me the question and I shall place it before my ministers. They are sure to solve the problem in a trice."

"What is the most precious thing in the world? That is the question to which I have not been able to find a satisfactory answer. Sometimes I think it is one thing, sometimes another; but a final solution completely eludes me."

The king placed this problem before his ministers the next day and there was a long discussion or seminar as they call it on the subject. Each minister had a different answer to give. One said money was the most precious thing, another said it was good fortune, a third thought that it was power, while a fourth considered intelligence as the greatest thing in the world. None of these replies satisfied the King and the question was left undecided after a debate which had lasted for two full hours. He then called Shamu and told him of the various answers given by the ministers, adding at the end:

"I am not satisfied that any of these is correct. However, as the son of the greatest minister I ever had, and as a wise youth which you no doubt appear to be, have you got any suggestion to make?"

"I am sorry, your majesty. I am more puzzled than anyone else. Probably my brother Ramu might be able to offer a satisfactory suggestion," replied Shamu.

Ramu was sent for and the question squarely put to him. Ramu replied in a quiet, measured tone:

"Your majesty, the greatest thing in the world is not wealth or power. Nor is it intelligence or luck, or anything else of that sort, however great each of these may be in its own way. If we are to find the most precious thing we must search for it in something which is within the reach of everyone in the world; even of the poorest of your majesty's subjects."

This description made the whole assembly curious and the king asked: "What may that be, my boy?"

THE FOUR RIDDLES

"My Lord! the most precious thing in the world is the word of man. It can create misery or give great pleasure. It can flare up a fight or restore peace."

The answer pleased the king immensely. The ministers agreed and each secretly said to himself: "How I wish I had though of it!" Meanwhile, the king spoke:

"Ramu, you deserve a prize. Ask what you want, my boy, and it shall be given to you."

Ramu requested that he may be given one thousand rupees, which was then and there handed over to him; Ramu and Shamu went away happy and contented.

A few days later, the king was in his palace gardens when he saw Ramu tending a jasmine vine that had fallen down from the tree on to which it had been trained. He looked so sad and thoughtful that the king asked him: "Ramu why are you so sad? What is it that worries you?"

Ramu replied that his brother Shamu had been making fun of him. He was always telling him that since he had proved to be so clever by answering the puzzle posed by the king, he should be able to answer the next question that follows naturally from the first one.

"And what may that be?" the king asked.

"Shamu tells me thus: 'Now, everyone has admitted that the word is the most precious thing in the world. Where then does this most precious thing reside? Where is it to be found? That is the question'."

The king agreed: "Yes, Ramu. That is true. Where does the most precious thing reside? Do you know the answer to that question?"

"No, your majesty. I have not been able to find a satisfactory answer to the question. And that is what worries me so much. Sometimes I think of one thing, sometimes of another but a final solution completely eludes me."

The king placed this problem also before his ministers, the next morning and there was a long discussion or seminar as they call it, this time also. Each minister had a different suggestion to offer. One said the most valuable

word lives in a learned personage. Another said it had its being in the poet's mind. A third answered that the Guru's word was the most valuable, and so on and so forth. None of these replies satisfied the king. The question being unsolved after two hours of discussion, the king called Ramu and after explaining to him the various answers given by his ministers together with the reasons given by each, he added:

"I am not satisfied that any one of these is correct. Have you been able, in the meanwhile, to find a solution to the problem?"

"No, your majesty. I have not yet been able to do so. Your majesty might perhaps summon my brother and ask him to explain whether he has been able to find a suitable answer. He would not tell me, but from the smile on his face I could see that he has got some answer to his own question."

Shamu, when he was brought before the king, explained: "The most valuable words are those of truthful men, not that of pundits or poets or even (begging your majesty's pardon) that of kings."

This answer pleased the king immensely. The ministers were only too happy to agree, although inwardly their jealousy increased. The king out of his graciousness, offered a present to Shamu, who asked for one thousand rupees which was promptly given to him.

A few days later, the king asked Shamu who was cleaning a lotus tank of weeds, whether the brothers had solved all the problems about the word of man or whether they still had some question or other left unsolved.

"Victory to your majesty!" replied Shamu. "The most precious thing in the world is the word of man: and it resides on the tip of the tongue of a truthful person. This much has now been agreed to by all. The question, however, is what is that which supports the life of this most precious thing on earth?"

This question was also placed before the ministers. The

result was the same as before. No one could solve the riddle, and both Ramu and Shamu were brought before the king, to see if they had, in the meanwhile, found an answer to their own poser. This time Ramu spoke:

"The word that lives in the truthful man has broad-mindedness for its life-blood," answered the youth. This reply pleased the king and his courtiers. Ramu was given one thousand rupees.

A few days later, Ramu was found dejected. His problem this time was: "The word lives in the truthful man and it has broad-mindedness for its life-blood, what does it achieve, my lord, that is the question?"

The fourth time too, Ramu and Shamu had to be brought before the king and Ramu again spoke:

"The most precious thing in the world is the word of man. It resides on the tip of the tongue of a truthful man. Broad-mindednes is its life-blood. It can achieve things which money, prowess or even courage alone may not be able to achieve."

The king was more puzzled than pleased with this answer. He saw that there was some hint at something that has happened in his palace, hidden beneath these words of his minister's sons. He said so, and asked them to explain.

The boys took out the three thousand rupees they had won. Placed the bag at the feet of the King and stood back, while Shamu explained:

"Your majesty. The chief minister's words that our father owed him three thousand rupees were not that of a truthful person. However, here are the three thousand rupees. If your majesty, in your wisdom, considers that our father owed this money to the minister, it may be given back to the chief minister. Otherwise, it may be used to build a shelter for the poor."

The chief minister's face clearly showed that he had told a lie. He confessed it when asked by the king. He was, therefore, dismissed and Shamu and Ramu were appointed as high officials in the palace.

THE ADVENTURES OF GUSTAB

GUSTAB was a prince of Persia; a strong, athletic, brilliant, handsome prince. He did not like the power and the position and the honour which he received in Persia itself. He was not sure how much of it was due to his own merits and how much due to his very high position in the country. "I shall go away to some other land disguised as an ordinary person and find out how high I can rise by my own merit and valour," said he to himself, and set out disguised as an ordinary soldier, in search of a job.

In those old days there was, to the west of Persia, a rich kingdom called Rumi. The king of Rumi was a kind and benevolent man who cared more for a man's qualities of mind and heart than for his position in life, in appointing persons to responsible positions. He had three very charming daughters, whose faces were as pretty as the full moon and whose smiles were as soothing as moonlight. Their gait was undulating as that of a swan; their hands resembled the tender vine; their lips were ruby red and their teeth were pearly white. Their complexion resembled milk with a dash of vermilion on it. When Gustab arrived at the capital of Rumi, he heard that the king was on the look-out for a captain of the guards to the Zenana. Here, thought he, was a wonderful chance to get a job in the palace, and presented himself as a candidate. A stranger in the land though he was, his noble bearing, strength and the extreme ease with which he defeated his rivals in feats of strength, archery, and fencing, made him the darling of the crowd and endeared him to the king, who appointed him as the captain of the guards. The king's daughters were as happy as sparrows in spring, that their protection was in the hands of a personage of such accomplishments and noble aspect. The eldest daughter

promptly fell in love with Gustab. He too loved her, but kept his distance for the time being, biding his time when he would rise high enough to presume to ask for her hand in marriage. Little did he know that she would not wait for that length of time.

The appointment of Gustab to a post coveted by all the noble youth among the courtiers of the palace, created for him a number of enemies. They managed to stage a fight in the palace grounds, laying the whole blame squarely on Gustab. The king was sad that his choice should have fallen on the wrong person. Believing his own old followers' words, against the protestations of innocence by Gustab, the king banished him from the country. The eldest princess did not for a moment believe the accusations levelled by the jealous courtiers. Unfortunately, she had no proof and had to nurse her belief in the secret recesses of her heart. All the same, when Gustab left the capital the next day, the princess went away with him.

They rode far out into the country and reached a lake, where they spent the night in an old deserted mosque. The next day they rode out again. Travelling thus by stages, in five days they crossed the border of Rumi and reached another state. There they both took lodging in an inn and Gustab went out in search of work. He met a caravan of merchants, with a lot of merchandise on camels and asked them for a job as a camel-keeper. They did not want any hands. Gustab left disappointed. Next, he tried to get work under a farmer. The farmer did not want any hands. Gustab returned. The third day he went to a blacksmith's shop and offered to help. The blacksmith noticing this mighty youth who had strong and sinewy arms, gladly took him on as an assistant. But the first blow Gustab gave with the hammer shattered the anvil to pieces. Poor Gustab, lost that job also.

Next he met a wood-cutter, who daily crossed the river in a boat, went out into the jungle, chopped wood, brought

it back and sold it in the town. They fell to talking. Gustab offered to help him in cutting wood, and the wood-cutter gladly agreed. They went out into the jungle and chopped wood till evening. By this time Gustab had learnt that strength alone is not enough; one has to learn how to moderate its use to the needs of the task. Between them, they were able to gather a heap of firewood as high as a small hill and Gustab's strength enabled him to carry the bundle with ease; a bundle which no human being could have carried. They were both as happy as baby elephants who had found plenty of palm leaves to eat. At night, Gustab and the wood-cutter sat down and talked about their past. To their surprise, they discovered that they were relatives. The wood-cutter being the grandson of a grand uncle of Gustab who had gone away from home and luxury, because his father had punished him without justice. After this discovery, they became the thickest of friends.

On their journey from the woods to the bazar where they sold the firewood, they had to cross another river. This ferryman also became very soon their friend and helpmate. One day when Gustab and his friend reached the ferry with firewood, they saw a tall handsome youth talking to the ferryman. It was revealed that this youth was a nobleman's son, who had sought the hand of the second princess of Rumi. But the task laid down by the king was too hard for him to achieve without help. The kingdom of Rumi was in those days pestered by a gigantic wolf, whom no one dared to approach or kill. The hand of the princess was offered to the youth provided he killed the wolf and rid the country of its ravages. The boatman who had great faith in the valour, strength and selflessness of Gustab had brought him along, promising help in his romantic adventure.

Gustab was only too willing to break the monotony of a wood-cutter's life and pit his strength and skill against the formidable wolf. The next morning, both of them

went to the northern border of Rumi, a hilly place which was the haunt of the wolf. Sitting on a branch of a tree by the side of a river they waited for the animal to come that way for a drink. The whole jungle around appeared to be deserted. No animal dared to venture into that area. Even birds kept away from this haunt of the wolf; such was the terror which the beast had created all around. After a couple of hours wait, they saw the wolf come at a trot; its fangs red with human blood, and its coat covered in patches with blood that had dried into flakes. It was so big that Gustab could easily understand why legend described it to be as big as an elephant. The young nobleman was all excitement. Gustab allowed him to have the first shot, for, after all, it was his game. He sent an arrow swift and strong that hit the animal just behind the shoulder blade. The wolf raised a howl that sent a chill down the spine of all who heard it. Even the trees shivered in fright. In its agony, the wolf rushed into a nearby thicket. The youth jumped down spear in hand to finish the job. Gustab followed close on his heel. The death pangs of the wolf made it fiercer than ever. It sprang at the nobleman and caught him in a vice like grip by his shoulder. Gustab rushed in, pierced the animal through with one thrust of his spear, and catching holds of its fangs, tore them apart. The animal fell down dead. Great was the rejoicing of the people of those parts at the death of the wolf, and a great crowd followed the youth when he had its corpse tied to a bamboo and taken to the palace in a procession.

The king was relieved that the scourge had been overcome; glad that it was done by such a noble youth, and with royal grace and appropriate grandeur performed the marriage ceremony of the princess to the noble youth. Although he was invited to the wedding, Gustab declined firmly but politely, to attend the ceremonies. At the wedding feast every guest was talking of the unknown wood-cutter who had helped the nobleman to kill the

wolf at the risk of his life. The king too was curious to know who was the man who could tear up a wolf's fangs with his bare hands. No one could tell him who he was. The princess heard with wide open ears the description of the fight and of the prowess of the wood-cutter. She at once guessed who it was but did not dare to tell her father or even her husband what she knew in her heart of hearts. The king had not yet forgiven his daughter who had eloped; and so the time to reveal the identity of the hero was not yet ripe.

Not long afterwards, the boatman brought to Gustab another suitor. He too was noble, handsome, strong, brave and young. He too was in love with the sister of Gustab's wife. He too had a task to perform. This was to kill a dragon that attacked the eastern border of the kingdom of Rumi. His lady love, it was, who had advised him to search out the wood-cutter and get his help in destroying the dragon. Yes, she had known by intuition that it was her elder sister's husband who had helped kill the wolf.

The dragon was full fifty feet in length. It was a fire spitting dragon, spitting fire up to a hundred feet. The scales were so thick that no weapon could pierce it. Its very roar was enough to make people faint with fright. The clang of its claws, as it stalked over the rocks at unbelievable speed, rang from corner to corner of the valley surrounded by hills. Gustab had fortunately learnt a few magical feats from a master archer who came to his father's palace from India. He uttered some manthras (spell) and sent an arrow into the sky, which brought down a heavy downpour of rain. After discharging this arrow, known as Varuna Astra (the arrow of the water god), he approached the dragon straight, with the youth on his right. Like the octopus, the eyes alone were the vulnerable part of the dragon. One had to thrust two spears simultaneously into both the eyes, deep enough to penetarte the brain. Gustab's spear went home; but that of the youth snapped right in the middle. The dragon

lashed its tail blindly, hitting the youth in the sweep. Luckily he was thrown off into the river and the dragon could not see to follow its victim. Gustab leaped high, as high as the height of eighteen men, and landed feet foremost like a rope dancer, right on the tender spot between the eyes. The dragon fell flat in a swoon. It was not yet dead. Gustab could have cut off its head. But he dared not go near it, until all movement had stopped and he was doubly sure that the dragon was dead.

By this time, the youth had returned. Between them they tied it up by means of the famous vine known as Naranda Valley, which jungle people often use to tie up elephants. Passing two strong trunks of teak wood at both ends, they carried the monster to the capital, like a terrific hammock.

The king then and there gave his daughter to the youth. "We shall perform the ceremonies later", he said; "let the marriage take place here and now" And so it was done. The two daughters then revealed to their father the identity of Gustab. Needless to say, the king forgave him with all his heart. With tears in his eyes, a lump in his throat, and his tongue stuttering with emotion, he embraced his eldest son-in-law and sent for his daughter to be brought back to the palace post haste.

Meanwhile, news of Gustab's exploits had reached Persia. In a week's time the king of Persia came with a retinue and elephants and laden with precious presents for all the couples. The meeting of the two kings was celebrated for seven full days, after which the king of Persia returned home with his son and daughter-in-law. There he expressed his desire to lay down the reins of kingship and crowned his son in his place. They lived happily for a long time surrounded by children, relatives, friends and courtiers.

THE CLEVEREST MAN IN THE KINGDOM

VIKRAMNAGAR is the name of a town in India, famous for the number of clever men it has produced. Among all the clever sons of Vikramnagar, the cleverest was Rakhal, the son of very holy brahmin parents. Rakhal was so very very clever, that at first his father and, of course, his mother were immensely proud of him. Rakhal did that; Rakhal asked this; Rakhal said that—was all the topic that Rakhal's mother had while talking to her relatives and friends and even casual acquaintances.

In the course of four to five years, however, things took a different turn. Rakhal used his brains to trick other children, tease the dogs and cats and cows, and gradually he started his pranks on the elders also. His mother, therefore, sent him to school, more to get him off her hands for a few hours, then to make him an educated lad. He learnt his lessons very very quickly, and did the sums in a twinkling so much so that he had plenty of time for mischief. When a brilliant boy is mischievously inclined, you can very well guess what would happen. That is just what happened. He actually turned the school inside out and upside down. The teachers despaired of him and the headmaster gave up all attempts to stop the boy from mischief. Finally, he went to Rakhal's father and begged him to take the boy away from school.

The old man who knew his son's infinite capacity for misadventure, agreed with the headmaster and took him off the roll in the school. This was like adding kerosene oil to a burning bush. Rakhal's idle hands found plenty of things to do. He untied calves and made them drink the milk of cows. He drove a host of sheep on to clothes spread in the grass to dry. He pushed fishermen into the river. Tied crackers to puppies' tails and set fire to

them. One day an old blind man was gingerly crossing a bamboo bridge holding on to the railings. By the time he reached the middle, the bamboo bridge began to shake vigorously. The blind man cried out:

"Rakhal, please stop; or I shall fall down and die."

Rakhal stopped shaking the bridge, but asked the blind old man:

"Hallo! Dada (grandpa), blind as you are, how did you know it was I who shook the bridge?"

"My dear Rakhal, who else but you would shake a bridge when a blind man is crossing it?" was the reply.

Rakhal's father, who happened to be passing by, was sadly shaken by this incident which clearly proved that Rakhal's name had become a byword for rascality in the whole place. As soon as he reached home, he sent for Rakhal and scolded him well and proper, ending up by asking him to get out of his house and quit the town, never to return until he mended his ways and repented his actions.

Rakhal left the house, telling his father, "today I go my dear father, an unwanted son, missed by no one, but one day I shall return as an honoured guest, feasted and fed by every one in this town."

He went straight to the capital of the state where the rajah lived in all his glory. The rajah had a beautiful daughter. The daughter was unmarried. A proposal was proclaimed for her marriage, the very day Rakhal stepped into the capital. The proclamation said that the princess would be married to the cleverest youth in the kingdom, no matter what his position in life happened to be. "Here is the chance of a lifetime," thought Rakhal, deciding then and there to prove himself to be the cleverest youth in the state and win the princess as a bride.

The best way to prove one's cleverness is to dupe the daroga (or head of the police), thought Rakhal and promptly proceeded to put his plan into action. Dressed in saffron robes, his forehead besmeared with ashes,

making his long hair matty by the paste of the bark of the banian tree with a kamandal (an oval vessel for receiving alms), a rudraksha (rosary) and a trident, he went about praying aloud for the benefit of the ears of the credulous: "Bhum Bhum Bhola—Ma Kali—Bhadra Kali." With the authoritative air of a sadhu (mendicant) who is welcome everywhere, he walked into the courtyard of the daroga, when the master was out on his ronda (rounds). The mistress of the house and the daughter received the sadhu, gave him water to wash his feet, a mat to sit down, water to refresh himself, and sweet and savoury food to eat. Thus rested and refreshed the Sadhu enquired of their welfare. Both mother and daughter had one main worry in life. They did not have long lustrous black hair, for which Bengalee ladies are famous. The sadhu consoled them and promised to rid them of this worry.

"Wear all your ornaments, shave the hair, and come with me to the temple tank with prayers in your heart and on your lips," he advised them. They suited their action to his words and followed him up the hill to the lonely Kali temple that had a small fresh water tank on the south-eastern part of it. There he told them to leave their ornaments in the presence of the deity, enter the water, blind fold themselves and utter a particular manthra, which he had whispered into their ears, a thousand and eight times. They did so, religiously following his instructions. When the manthras had been repeated a thousand and eight times they opened their eyes and looked for the sadhu. He had disappeared. So had their ornaments.

It was a wet, befooled moaning wife and daughter that the daroga met when he returned home. They narrated all that had happened. Cursing them for their superstition, and shouting threats at the rascal, disguised as a sadhu, he set out to catch him and thrash him black and blue.

The whole police force turned out in search of Rakhal. The whole day they searched, but nowhere could they find

the bogus sadhu. Towards evening the king decided that he himself should set out and catch the thief. If the chief of the police force could be cheated in broad daylight in the capital of the state, the people at large would lose all confidence in the king. Fully dressed as the commander of the police, he rode out of the city and proceeded towards a hill where he thought the fugitive from justice would have taken refuge. A mile or so away he met another sadhu. He had only a loin cloth of leopard skin for his clothes. The king stopped his horse, told the man the story of his quest and asked him if he had seen anyone of that description.

"An hour ago, I saw a sadhu pass this way. From your description, I feel that he must have been the rascal. He seemed to be in a frightful hurry." The king rode fast in the direction pointed out by the sadhu. He went a few miles, until he came to a place where the road led in two different directions. Taking the right one first, he rode for half an hour, without any result or hope of a result. He returned to the junction of the road and taking the left turning rode a couple of miles. Nothing happened. By this time darkness having set in, the king thought it best to give up this wild goose chase and come back to the place where the sadhu sat.

This time the sadhu suggested another plan to catch the rascal. Your majesty, he said, is not familiar with these places or the ways of these men. I belong to this place and I know enough of the world, to guess how the minds of such men work. Please give me your clothes and your horse. The clothes will give me the authority to arrest him and the horse the means of reaching his hide-out quickly. The king agreed.

The sadhu in kingly robes, riding the king's horse, rode by a short cut straight to the palace, where the guards opened wide the gates for him to pass. "A half naked sadhu will come this way, claiming that he is the king. That is the man we are after. As soon as he comes, lock

him up for the night. I shall deal with him tomorrow morning. For the present, I want some well-earned rest." Instructing the guards in this manner the sadhu went into the palace. The private secretary gave him the keys to the king's private chamber. The sadhu took away some gold bars and rode out by the rear gate of the palace.

The next morning when the guards opened the lock-up room to bring out the prisoner they discovered to their dismay that they had imprisoned the king. They fell at his feet and begged his pardon, which was soon granted. The king was impatient to get hold of the man who had deceived the whole lot of them. He sent out a proclamation that the person who would fetch the great deceiver before him would be made the governor of a province under him.

The next day, early in the morning, Rakhal appeared before the palace and boasted that he would point out the man who was responsible for all the mischief of the last two days. The guards brought him to the royal presence. The king asked him.

"Do you know who was the man who was responsible for all the misdeeds during the last two days?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I know him as well as I know myself."

"Who is he?"

"Your Majesty has, I hear, announced that the person who discloses the identity of this man will be made the governor of a province."

"Yes. I have announced so; and I give you that assurance. If you reveal the identity of the man, you will be made the governor of a province under me."

"Your Majesty, I am the man whom you want. Your majesty may punish me, but I have to be made the governor of a province."

The king was in a dilemma. What was he to do? He could not send a man to jail and make him the governor of a province at once at the same time. After some hesita-

tion, his magnanimity prevailed. Although the tricks were played upon himself, he forgave the misdeeds in his admiration for Rakhal.

"I agree with you. I hereby proclaim you as the governor of the southern province in my country"—declared the king.

Rakhal bowed low, and gratefully thanked the king for his graciousness, saying: "Your Majesty will have no occasion whatever to regret your grace in granting me this boon. I have, however, one more request to make."

"What is that?"—the king asked.

"Sir! I hope, I have by winning a province in two days proved that I am the cleverest man in the country."

The king laughed aloud. "Ah! ah! I knew that you would raise this issue. I have already decided. As already proclaimed, the cleverest man in the kingdom shall wed my daughter."

Thus it was, that Rakhal returned home a victorious lad, and all the town turned out to welcome him like an honoured son of the soil.

MAHBUB-I-ALAM

(The Beloved of the Universe)

In ancient days, there lived in Persia, a powerful king called Mansur-i-Alam (the conqueror of the universe). He was blessed with all the good things in life; health, beauty, strength and wisdom. He was just and firm, kind and forgiving, all at the same time. Living in dignity, without showing off his wealth, his people respected him and loved him. A king should be a god on earth for his subjects, was his principle in life. One could almost say that Mansur-i-Alam was perfect in his happiness, but for one sorrow that gnawed at his heart night and day. He had no issue. For a man who loved children immensely and for a king who yearned to bring up a prince to become an ideal king, this sorrow lay indeed very heavily on his head. His subjects wondered how such a great and noble king, every drop of whose blood was more precious to them than the most precious gem in all the world, should be childless and thereby unhappy. "Mysterious are the ways of Providence," Mansur-i-Alam used to reply to the consoling words of his friends and counsellors.

The queen prayed; she made offerings to the gods; she gave alms to the poor; she fasted on holy days; she went on pilgrimages. All in vain. They remained childless for several years. And then, on the advice of soothsayers the king decided to adopt a baby boy as his son. As they told him that a boy born on full moon day at exactly the middle of the night should be adopted, the king sent round messengers to find out such a child. The messengers returned with a little boy, the son of a dacoit, whom the father had cruelly deserted as an unwanted child. The poor, helpless, starving mother was sad to part with her only consolation in life, but glad too that her son was to become the king of Persia in course of time.

The boy grew up in the palace not knowing that he was not of royal blood. The king and queen brought him up in luxury and appointed the best of tutors for his education. Unfortunately, the boy was clever but rotten at heart. When a rascal is educated, he becomes an educated rascal. When he was fifteen years of age, the king appointed him the governor of a province, so that he might learn the art of governing a country, by ruling a part of it. What he learnt there was, however, how to tyrannise over the people. Within a year, the prince, whose name, by the way, was Qassab, was successful in winning the hearty hatred of every subject in his province, by his arrogance, cruelty and corruption. News of his misdeeds reached the king in devious ways. He did not believe them, thinking that these reports were the fruits of jealousy among the nobles who knew the truth of the humble origin of the prince. Qassab also learnt about his lowly birth; and it made him all the more determined to stick to his acquired position by every means at his disposal.

Therefore, it was, that he was beside himself with rage when news reached him that the queen would soon be having a child. While all the country rejoiced over the happy event, Qassab boiled with anger and secretly determined to kill the king and queen and usurp the kingdom before a rival to the throne saw the light of day. With this plan in his mind he paid a visit to the royal palace where the unsuspecting king received him with open arms and talked with carefree happiness about the expected happy event. The queen, on the other hand, had an intuition that her step son had evil designs towards her and her still to be born child. And so, when Qassab stabbed the king to death in his sleep and went to the zenana to finish the work he had begun, he saw that the queen was nowhere to be seen. She had fled the country

and taken resort in a forest. Qassab was too busy consolidating his position as the king, to follow and discover the queen in her hiding place. "There is time enough to do it, when I am in full power," he said to himself.

MAHBUB IS BORN

The queen was found weeping, wan and alone in the jungle by a Zamindar (a landed noble man). He could discern that she was of noble birth. He approached her and enquired: "Who are you gentle lady? Why are you alone and weeping in this lonely place?" The queen explained her plight and told the Zamindar not to risk his own life too, by attempting to help her. As luck would have it, the Zamindar was the owner of extensive forests covering the border of different countries under two different rulers. He was, therefore, in a position to take her outside Qassab's territory altogether, and give her shelter. She stayed with an old couple who looked after a part of the forest on behalf of the Zamindar; a kind couple who had no issue of their own. They were only too happy to have her for their company, and happier still, when a gem of a son was born in their house. The patter of feet was sweet, and the laughter of the child sweeter still. Sometimes, when the little boy—he had grown up into a bundle of mischief at the age of two—made too much noise, the queen used to scold him and bid him keep quiet. The old man chided her and said: "My dear daughter, it is only people who have no ear for the laughter of children that are fond of music." The old man of the house, who was a sort of seer in his own way, named the boy Mahbub-i-Alam—Beloved of the Universe.

When Mahbub grew up, he learnt to read and write from his mother. Religious instruction, the old lady of the house gave him; while he learnt the art of archery, fencing, and wrestling from the jungle folk of the area. They were very famous in these arts so much so that neighbour-

ing kings used this community as recruiting material for their guards and soldiers. Under such expert tuition, the royal youth had become a stalwart, when they heard that king Qassab, the usurper, was holding a tournament. Mahbub decided to go. His mother dissuaded him, but his guardian persuaded her to allow him to have his way. Accompanied by half a dozen young athletes they made their way to the capital and camped at a serai. Among the companions of Mahbub, one specially strong staunch friend, Habib, always kept close as if he were guarding him from some unknown harm. Mahbub was curious to know why. Yet he did not put the question to him straight, thinking that in course of time the reason would be apparent of itself. Nothing remains hidden for all time. Had he asked Habib and had the latter revealed the secret, Mahbub would have known that he was the real heir to the throne which Qassab had usurped, and also that his mother was trembling with fear lest anyone should guess his real identity and thereby endanger his life.

MAHBUB LEARNS THE TRUTH

Mahbub was so engrossed in his preparations for the events of the tournaments, discussing their prospects, finding out the talents of their rivals, bracing himself up for the tasks ahead, by diet, rest, exercise and massage, that he had no time to enquire why Habib stuck to him as faithful as a shadow. The next day the great athletic events, the feats of archery and strength, the lists of swordsmanship, and such other items that fill the programme of royal tournaments began at dawn. Mahbub hit the the eye of a fast revolving bird with a bow others could hardly lift. A ball hung twelve feet high was hit by his feet as easily as a half-back takes a football in flight. Habib sent a wooden scantling piercing through a bell metal vessel. A lemon placed on the open palm of a com-

panion was cut vertically in two by a single stroke with a sword of Damascus steel. At the end of it all, Qassab announced the trophies to the victorious team. They could enter the armoury, choose the best armour they desired, the finest sword they wanted and going to the stables mount the steed of their choice. Mahbub chose the robes his father used to wear, his father's sword and the white Arab which was the son of his father's favourite mount.

When he came out, arrayed in this manner the huge crowd assembled there gasped in surprise. For a moment they thought that their beloved long lost king had come back to life; Mahbub's resemblence to his father was so complete. Qassab at once guessed the truth. In the midst of the roar of applause, the waving of turbans and kerchieves, and the rushing about of people, Qassab ordered his soldiers to apprehend Mahbub and his men. They had no love for their master, but were, to a man, devoted to their deceased king. They rushed about more to create confusion than to capture Mahbub. The whole plot was not lost on Mahbub's shadow, Habib. Urged by him, the whole lot of them galloped off to safety. It was only when they had reached far far away that they halted, by the side of a brook to rest themselves and their horses. There, as they reclined by the brink of the brook, refreshed by the spray of the wind in their hair, Habib told Mahbub the story of his birth in exile after the murder of his father by Qassab.

ADVENTURES IN EXILE

The prince was all impatience to wreak vengeance on the usurper of his father's throne. As soon as he reached home, he flew into his mother's arms and told her, without stopping even to breathe, all that had happened. She smiled and she wept. She felt very frightened at the danger which awaited her son; but say what she might, Mahbub could not be dissuaded from his determination to

win back his throne. There was nothing else to do, but to leave the Zamindar's house, where Qassab's men were sure to find them out. They decided to go into hiding. The Zamindar's tenant was sad to part with the mother and son, who had become beloved personage in his family. His wife wept to think how vacant and lifeless their home would be without Mahbub to enliven every room in it. Even so, they realised that they could not stand in the way of their going out to safety, and of Mahbub hacking out a future for himself, befitting his royal birth and regal qualities.

Mahbub and his mother reached a far off hill at sunset. On the hill they saw a dilapidated, forsaken mosque, which served at one time as a prayer hall for caravans travelling to and from Damascus. A number of years ago a new and shorter route had been found out, and caravans had given up going this way. In this mosque lived an aged faqir. No one knew how he lived. People believed that he lived on air as his food. Others believed that he was a mystic who could work wonders in the world. Mahbub and the queen felt that they would be saved as soon as they met the faqir.

He gave them one piece of bread to eat; a piece hardly enough for even one person, let alone two. The mother said she was not hungry, and asked Mahbub to eat it. The son would not have it either, "If mother does not eat anything, I too will go without food." And so an argument arose between the mother and the son. The faqir watched the battle of love for some time and then told them. "Start eating, my children. Start eating. You can argue later." Then Mahbub broke a piece and offered it to mother. When he did so, the piece in his hand grew to its former size. Yes. It was a magic bread. After they had eaten their fill, the bread left was the same size as before. Then the faqir gave them a small goblet of water to drink. And so, another argument arose as to who should drink the water. The faqir watched the fun for some time, before

he told them the goblet too was a magic goblet. However much one may drink out of it, the goblet would still be full. So having allayed their hunger and their thirst, Mahbub and his mother stayed there for the night.

In the morning Mahbub and the queen started to go along their way. "Where are you going? What do you intend to do?" asked the faqir. "The yonder hill is land's end. Beyond that is a raging sea, with very strong currents, mountain high waves, and treacherous whirlpools. No ship, however strong, can live in it. Beyond the sea is the great unknown. How can you go?"

Mahbub answered: "We do not know what to do. Our only hope is that your holiness will help us. Return home, we cannot do."

The faqir's eyes became wet with compassion: "I know who you are. I know your noble father, every drop of whose blood is far more precious than the most precious ruby in the world. I can see your future also. But I shall not tell you what it is. Do not try to pierce the veil that hides the future. The romance of life's adventure loses its charm once a man is sure of his future. I shall provide for you the means for proceeding on your journey."

Saying thus, he gave them the bread, the goblet of water, a small plank, and a torch. The qualities of the bread and the goblet they already knew. As for the plank, it was to be their ship in the roughest and deepest of seas. They had only to turn the narrower side in the direction they desired to go, and it would take them there. The torch would light them on their way and its glare frighten away all wild animals and giants too, whom they might meet on their journey. Equipped thus Mahbub set out on the sea with his mother. He coursed eastwards, for that was where, he was told, the great country of India lay.

The plank floated steady and what was more, it rendered the waters around it so calm that the sea for several square yards on all four sides looked like a light blue plate of glass. The torch lit them on their way. It also

revealed to them the wonders of the deep; the fish of various sizes, shapes and colours; the sea snakes and octopus; the undergrowth of the bottom that was breath-taking in its beauty as well as unbelievable in its strangeness of form and size. All these wonders were, however, nothing when compared to the wonder of wonders they saw as they approached the gulf near Gujerat in India. The sea assumed a ruby red colour along a belt several yards wide. Could it be blood? No. It was not blood that gave the red hue to the waters. It were rubies. Rubies of the most brilliant red. Millions and millions of them. Mahbub who had never been in a palace thought they were pretty marbles. The queen knew what they were. She knew that each one of the thousands and thousands of red stones flowing in a current from north-west to south-east, was a ruby of the purest ray, costing not less than a lakh of rupees. She knew that sudden wealth is very dangerous for a young man. Do not take them, my son, she warned him. The lovely stones you see, are dangerous stones for anyone to possess. Mahbub obeyed her and dropped the rubies he had scooped up in his hand. Later on, however, he could not resist the temptation to possess them. He took just one ruby and hid it in this clothes, without his mother's knowledge or permission.

When he had done so, they both espied land close by, and landed there. Mahbub taking up the plank, mother and son went inland until they reached the capital of Gujerat—famous for the marble palaces, beautiful roads, rich merchandise. It was the capital of a great king. There the mother and son rested in a dharmashala—a free house for wayfarers—built by the rich merchants as an act of charity. The next morning Mahbub set out to find some work for himself. Having failed to land a job in spite of a whole day's search, Mahbub got into a jewel merchant's shop and sold the ruby to him. The merchant's eyes opened wide as if they would fall out of their sockets, at the sight of the magnificent gem. He was not sure

whether Mahbub knew how priceless it was.

"How much do you want for this?" he asked.

"How much will you give?" replied Mahbub who felt by the man's manner that the ruby was more costly than he had thought.

"Will a thousand rupees do?" asked the merchant. The question clearly betrayed that the price offered was too low.

"No." replied Mahbub, very emphatically.

"All right then," said the man, who had recovered sufficiently from his shock as to be able to talk in a normal tone.

"I shall give you rupees five thousand," was his next offer.

Mahbub raised his prize and asked for fifteen thousand. Finally after some haggling the ruby was sold for ten thousand rupees, with which the prince went home.

His mother was thunderstruck when she saw what a large amount of money her son had brought.

"Surely, son! How did you get so much of money?" she asked him. She was frightened that her son might have stolen it; but did not have the heart to put it bluntly to him, like that. Mahbub replied:

"No mother. I have not stolen or done anything very improper in getting all this money. All that I have done was to disobey you a little."

"What do you mean, son? I do not understand. Tell me plainly and tell me quick, what you did."

"Mother," said Mahbub. "You remember, mother, the thousands and thousands of rubies we saw in the ocean. You told me not to take them. I disobeyed you a little; and took just one ruby. The merchant in the town gave me ten thousand rupees for it."

His mother smiled. Then she became grave. In a moment there was a determined look in her eyes.

"That ruby was worth 50,000 rupees my son; the merchant cheated you. Come, let us go and get the balance

due to us."

Mother and son went back to the market. The merchant gladly gave them 50,000 rupees, with which they returned. He could very well do so, because he had sold it for 1,00,000 rupees to the Vazier, who had in his turn sold it for 2,00,000 rupees to the King.

THE PRINCESS ASKS FOR MORE

The king took the ruby and presented it to his beautiful daughter, who then and there had a lovely gold chain made by the palace goldsmith and used it as a pendant for the chain. The chain was lovely, the ruby so magnificent and the wearer such a stunning beauty that all who saw her in the promenade thought:

"The gold chain enhances the beauty of the ruby; the ruby makes the chain more beautiful; while the ruby and the chain are both honoured by the lovely neck of the princess."

She went and sat under an Aswatha tree basking in the sunshine of everybody's admiration. On that Aswatha were two gandharvas (a species of fairies) disguised as parrots. They discussed thus about the princess, the gold chain and the ruby, exclaiming:

"What a pity, the princess has only one ruby!"

"Yes," said the other. "What a pity! Nine would have been the more appropriate number."

As soon as the princess heard this she became miserable. She wanted to have nine rubies. The single one which had made her so happy a moment ago, now made her unhappy, has soon as she desired for more. She went home more at a running than at a walking pace and fell into her father's arms weeping and sobbing and wailing. The king did not know where he could get nine such gems, even if he could scrape his whole treasury to raise the cost of such a collection. He could not deny his daughter either. The Vazier was sent for and asked to

produce eight more such gems at the risk of being exiled, if he failed. The Vavier ran to the merchant and asked him to bring eight more rubbies threatening him with death, if he failed. The merchant ran to the dharmsala to find the mother and son who had sold him the gem. They had disappeared. What was he to do?

Wandering aimlessly here and there, mainly because he dared not go back empty handed, and face the wrath of the Vazier, he found himself without knowing it, outside the walls of the capital city. A furlong or so away, he saw, a newly built house of the most beauteous aspect. The building was in a style foreign to his country. On enquiry he learnt that it was built by some new comers, overnight. Could they possibly be the two persons, mother and son who had sold him the gem? No harm in finding out. He walked in by the gate and was rooted to the ground, by what he saw. Mahbub was coming out of the house, dressed like a lord. The merchant made his obeisance and told him the purpose that had brought him there. Mahbub was willing to help, but would not go to the king.

"When I want something from the king I shall go to him. When the king wants something from me, he should come to me."

That was Mahbub's stand on the subject. When this was conveyed to the king he felt insulted and became very angry. All the same he had to swallow his pride and go to Mahbub, for the sake of his daughter.

Mahbub received him with such noble graciousness that the king forgot the slight, and forgave the man from the bottom of his heart. His noble bearing impressed the king. The promise he made that he would bring the rubies in four days' time at once surprised and pleased him.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

Mahbub taking the torch and the plank set out on his

journey over the waters to bring rubies for the king. The adventures he met on the way were so very strange and unworldly that they read like a fairy tale.

Walking on the ocean, as if he were wading through an ankle deep brook, thanks to the magic of the plank, Mahbub soon reached the red stream in mid-ocean where he had seen the rubies. The gems were still there in their purest form rendering the waters above a bluish red. When he reached near enough Mahbub dipped his hand to gather a few. He could not touch them. He took a step further and then another, and then another. Not a gem could he touch. Tantalisingly they receded at each step he took, until at last they had taken him to a whirlpool, which was foaming and seething with waters that churned at an immense speed. Mahbub had forgotten all sense of time and distance. He was not aware of his whereabouts and awoke, with a jolt when the whirling waters began to turn him round and round, faster and faster, towards the centre. His plank kept him from sinking, but seemed to have lost its power of steering in the desired direction. Whirling around with the waters, Mahbub was sucked into the vortex of the whirlpool, and he went down and down and down, whirling all the way. Two full nights and days he fell, before his feet touched the ground. And then when his giddiness disappeared and his eyesight cleared, the beauty of the chamber he saw took away his breath, while the dazzling gems, the glittering gold and bloodred crimson of the curtains, blinded him once again. He closed his eyes and opened them, slowly getting used to the blinding brilliance all around.

In the centre of the room was a chandelier with a thousand candles. The slighest wind like the opening or shutting of a door was enough to make the hanging prisms tremble, producing the sweetest tingle one could hope to hear. The huge hall was big enough to hold a reception for three thousand persons. Eight marble pillars had eight sides each. They were full six men's height from

the floor to the ceiling. The carvings of gods, fairies, flying horses and exotic animals were impressive by their size, variety and postures. One thousand elephants were carved on the walls; every one of them in a different pose. Mahbub's mind was stunned by his admiration of the imagination, craftsmanship and genius of design of the man who conceived and executed the whole chamber.

It took him some time before he noticed the source of all the rubies he had seen. That source was a severed head hanging from the centre of the chandelier. Drops of blood dripped from the head. Each drop as it fell at once became a ruby in the basin below, bounded high, and dropped outside into a slanting grove. There it rolled out and fell into a running brook. The never ending flow of rubies, astounded Mahbub. His wonder at this sight was surpassed only by the wonder that struck him at what followed presently. Eight pretty maidens, each prettier than the other, came floating into the room. They formed a circle. While seven stood around, the eighth rose above by pure levitation and taking down the head, wrapped it in a silk cloth. And then all of them floated out the way they came. Mahbub followed, like one walking in a dream. In the next room was a body without a head. The maidens attached the head to the body. It came to life and sat up. Mahbub fell back in a swoon at this most uncanny sight.

He opened his eyes and saw a middle-aged person sitting up looking earnestly at him. Although he had not seen him before, he realised instinctively that this was his long-lost father, the king who had been treacherously murdered by Qassab, the usurper. Mahbub was so overcome by surprise that he forgot to wonder how such a vision could be real. He bent low and salaamed, his fingers touching his toes and then his forehead; the whole body bent double towards his father. The king smiled and raised his hand to bless his son and a low sepulchural voice from the void announced:

"It was good that you came. You must perform your father's last rights. Then only can his body rest. After that, instead of worldly wealth, in the shape of previous rubies, his spirit will do priceless good to the world. You shall be the instrument to achieve the good. God fulfils himself through the deeds of men."

As soon as the voice ceased, there appeared from four sides, walking right through the wall, as if the wall were not there at all, four body-guards. With their help Mahbub interned his father's body and erected a marble tomb inlaid with gold in his honour. And then he returned the way he came. It was almost dawn when he finished the task.

All the time he had completely forgotten his mission; forgotten the king and his daughter; forgotten the rubies he had promised; forgotten even himself. He was a man who had strayed into some wonderland. When he landed, he remembered that he had forgotten to bring the rubies. What was he to do? In this mood he reached home and met his mother, who greeted him, as if he were a long-lost son who had come back unexpectedly. She did not care whether he had fulfilled his task or not. Her son had come back from another world altogether. Then Mahbub narrated all the adventures he had had in the realm of everlasting wonders below the fathomless ocean. The queen wept on hearing it. She blessed the spirit of her son. She thanked heaven for delivering him back from the deep, safe and sound. So many different emotions swelled up in her heart that she did not know what to do or say.

The arrival of the king's messenger brought them both back to the problem of the pearls. They feared the wrath of a disappointed father. But their fears were in vain. The messenger had clearly arrived not with an admonition. He had come to thank Mahbub's mother for the delivery of the rubies, effected by the son and invite her to the palace as an honoured guest. When he

saw Mahbub with his mother, he became speechless. His eyes bulged out with wonder. His chin dropped. He was like a man who had seen a vision. Quite a time did he take to recover. And when he did, the news he gave was so astonishing that it became the turn of Mahbub and his mother to be thunderstruck. "Will marvels never end!" they both exclaimed in one breath.

For, what the messenger told them was this: Mahbub had presented himself at the palace yesterday at dawn and handed over the rubies to the king. He refused to take any money in return although he was royally pressed to accept it. And then the king said: "Very well then. Since you will not take any money, I shall present you with something more precious to me than all the world: My daughter." Mahbub was willing to accept this gift, for he had already fallen in love with the princess and she with him. The royal wedding had been arranged, and the messenger had hastened to bring the queen quickly to the palace. But what he could not understand was, how Mahbub whom he had left in the palace could be here in flesh and blood.

"Let us stop trying to understand all these wonders," said Mahbub. And they both went with the messenger to the king. There they saw another Mahbub coming out to meet them. He came straight and embraced his twin form. As he did so, the two bodies merged into one, and only one Mahbub—a thoroughly perplexed Mahbub—was left.

The rest of the story is very soon told. Mahbub married the princess; he went back to Persia, killed Qassab in a duel; ascended the throne, and lived happily for years and years and years on end. He justified his name Mahbub-i-Alam by his good deeds and generous nature.

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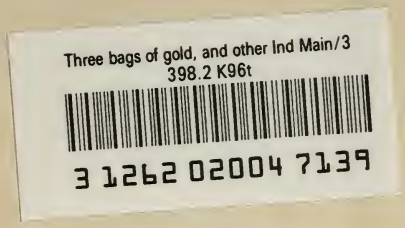
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